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## **Introduction to Special Issue: Critical Perspectives on Covid19 in Latin America<sup>2</sup>**

In late-2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan, a new deadly pathogen reared its ugly head. In the first quarter of 2020, this novel coronavirus spread around the globe, leaving death and destruction in its wake. What was initially considered a domestic problem in China became a global crisis as the virus reached the developed world. Hundreds of deaths in the northern Italian province of Lombardy during the months of March and April provoked panic amongst western political leaders (Malm, 2020: 18; Usuelli, 2020). COVID-19, as this new disease came to be known, arrived in Latin America in late-February, with the first registered case in São Paulo, Brazil. By late-July, the region had the most cases of any region in the world (Gideon, 2020: 4). By April 2021, spurred on the appearance of new variants—particularly the P.1 variant first detected in the Amazonian city of Manaus (Taylor, 2021)—Latin America had been hit by its third wave of the pandemic, registering more than 57 million cases and 1.3 million deaths since the start of the pandemic (Pan American Health Organization, 2021). In the space of little over a year, COVID-19 became a global zeitgeist, casting a shadow over virtually all areas of social, economic and political life.

In this introduction to Alternautas' Special Issue on Critical Perspectives on COVID-19 in Latin America, I set the scene, providing the backdrop to the contributions of the articles in the rest of the issue. I trace the global reverberations of COVID-19 and explore how they played out in Latin America. I then turn to

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the articles of the issue in turn, exploring the novel facets of the pandemic in Latin America to which they draw our gaze.

### **A Global Pandemic**

COVID-19 is a global pandemic, and its course in Latin America cannot be understood outside global historical trends or the geopolitical and geoeconomics, reactions provoked by the disease. The past forty years has seen the growing interconnectedness of the world, as production spread across the globe through vast transcontinental production networks. In the face of stagnant wages and historically low economic growth in the global North—what Robert Brenner (2006) calls the Long Downturn—from the 1970s onwards, capital increasingly forced firms to enter a footrace with competitors and the clock, with profits squeezed out of every second saved. These features of the neoliberal period of capitalism created the ideal conditions for contagion, both of deadly diseases and economic shocks. As a result, whilst it took the black death a decade to travel the length of the silk road in the Middle Ages, COVID-19 had spread from ground zero in Wuhan, China, to seventy-two countries in a matter of months, travelling along the infrastructural pathways and corridors cut out by global circuits of capital (Moody, 2020).

Political Economists Sara Stevano, Tobias Franz, Yannis Dafermos and Elisa Van Waeyenberge (2021) argue that COVID-19 provides a ‘magnifying glass’, illuminating the contradictions of the neoliberal form of capitalism underpinning the growing interconnectedness of globalised production outlined above. These authors remind us that ‘Despite the significant transformations of globalised contemporary capitalism through financialisation and technological progress, the COVID-19 crisis is a stark reminder that the kernel of human activity is intrinsically material and embedded in the socio-economic and biophysical basis of production and reproduction’ (Stevano et al., 2021: 2).

The Covid-19 pandemic is part of a broader confluence of multiple, intertwined crises that have emerged out of the dominant modes of development. The virus itself was born on the (artificial) boundary between human society and nature, from the contradictory ways that capitalist social formations dominate animal species to feed themselves. Indeed, the major disease outbreaks of recent years

have all been traced to either agroindustrial meat production (Swine flu, H1N1) or the expansion of extractive activities deep into the last remaining great forests (Ebola, HIV-Aids) (Davis, 2012). Under the COVID-19 magnifying glass, the separation of society from nature in post-enlightenment thought and the promethean logic underpinning the political forms of capitalist modernity are shown to be illusionary. We may be social creatures, but we are creatures nevertheless, living in wider ecosystems, dependent on, and vulnerable to, the cycles and rhythms of the natural world. This leads to vital questions around the political ecological dimensions and effects of modes of development and their associated practices of extraction from, and destruction of, nature.

COVID-19 also revealed the extent of state power as governments stepped onto a war footing (Malm, 2020). Apparently sacred civil liberties lauded in western liberal democracies were curtailed as entire populations were instructed to stay home to stop the spread of the virus. In order to prevent complete economic collapse, government after government in high-income countries rewrote the economic rule book. Central Banks mobilised gargantuan sums to underwrite corporate debt and the livelihoods of the general population, either through furlough schemes designed to keep people in work (as was the case across much of Europe) or through universal cash transfer programmes (as was the case in the United States). In many cases, rent payments were frozen and evictions prohibited. Whole private enterprises were placed under the tutelage of the state, as the Spanish nationalised its private healthcare providers to help tackle the pandemic and the British and Italian governments stepped in to rescue ailing transport carriers—railways franchises in the case of the former, the airline Alitalia in the case of the latter (Malm, 2020: 10). The US Federal Reserve opened its liquidity taps on a scale not seen since the 2008 crisis (see Tooze, 2018), once again becoming the global lender of last resort (Bahaj and Reis, 2020a). The full power of the state was set to work to confront the pandemic, and despite decades of scholars declaring the withering of the state in the face of globalisation, the state was shown to be capable of mounting a massive coordinated response across many spheres of society in many countries across the globe.

However, the pandemic played out over existing inequalities, and not all states and citizens were able to respond in the same manner. As the International Monetary Fund (IMF) notes in its latest Fiscal Monitor report,

‘The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and poverty and has demonstrated the importance of social safety nets. It has also laid bare inequalities in access to basic services—health care, quality education, and digital infrastructure—which, in turn, may cause income gaps to persist generation’ (IMF, 2021: xii).

On the one hand, many poorer countries, including many in Latin America, could not mount the same response as high-income countries or mobilise seemingly endless resources, with some countries, such as Sudan and Zambia, actually decreasing their fiscal deficits during the pandemic (Stevano et al., 2021: 7). Developing countries do not have the same access to credit markets or ability to raise fiscal resources quickly (IMF, 2021: xi), a result of the subordinate integration into the global market. Credit lines were not extended to everyone by the US Federal Reserve, and beyond the capitalist North Atlantic core (plus Japan), the only middle-income countries included were Brazil, Mexico and South Korea, with African countries excluded altogether (Bahaj and Reis, 2020b). Moreover, countries in the global South found themselves at the hard edge of the wedge in financial markets, as capital fled contexts perceived as ‘high risk’ in what the IMF labelled ‘the largest capital outflow ever recorded’ (cited in Laskaridis, 2021: 10). Countries dependent on natural resource exports were hit particularly hard (see, for instance, Hanieh, 2020), as capital abandoned its fixed investments and half-finished infrastructure projects in the face of the pandemic, the start of which also coincided with a major disruption in energy markets. In 2016, the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and Russia signed an agreement in 2016, limiting global oil production to keep prices within a fixed range. This accord not only provided North American shale gas firms fertile conditions in which to flourish, but also consolidated a fracking boom in Argentina. The agreement’s collapse in March 2020 sent oil prices through the floor, with the US benchmark, West Texas Intermediate, briefly in the red for the first time in history during April 2020 (Hanieh, 2020: 2). This toxic cocktail of a global pandemic and jumpy global commodity markets led to a round of sovereign credit downgrades, further constraining the access to credit for countries that need it most and sparking fears of a new round of defaults by countries in the global South (Laskaridis, 2021: 10–11). Several authors have noted how the current debt architecture is not fit for purpose (see, for example, Laskaridis, 2021; Stubbs et

al., 2020), and how it is already restricting the fiscal space available to some countries at a time when the need to maintain public spending is paramount.

On the other hand, responses to the pandemic have increased inequalities within countries. In his Report to the Human Rights Council, Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights Philip Alston (2020: 9) called the pandemic ‘a pandemic of poverty’, highlighting how many of the world’s poor simply could not follow the favoured advice of the public health community: ‘stay home, socially distance, wash hands, and see a doctor in case of fever’. The Federal Reserve’s actions in the US largely targeted the corporate world, continuing ‘the politically driven upward redistribution of wealth’ overseen by both the Democrats and the Republicans in recent years (Brenner, 2020: 22). Lockdowns across the globe forced people into the confines of their home, deepening the centrality of households and the gendered division of labour within households in capitalism (Stevano, Mezzadri, et al., 2021). Large-scale social distancing measures shut down swathes of the economy, including the sectors predominantly employing women. Certain jobs were re-cast as essential for the minimum functioning of the economy and to confront the pandemic. All of a sudden, long-undervalued care jobs were recognised as socially necessary, whilst the high-flying lawyers, bankers and other well-paid professionals were forced to work from home. However, these essential jobs were disproportionately done by women and people of colour, increasing the exposure of these groups to the disease, with deadly effects (Raval, 2021; Wenham et al., 2020; Wenham, Smith and Morgan, 2020). Moreover, in a cruel twist of fate, instead of improving the social and economic status of essential workers, the category of ‘essential’ has exacerbated the reproduction of exploitation and precarity that marks these workers as disposable, even as they are recognised as indispensable (Stevano, Ali and Jamieson, 2020).

In short, the pandemic has played out over, and in many cases intensified, the contours of existing class, gender and racial inequalities. Nowhere is this more evident than the current vaccine rollout. Across the western world, vaccines were developed using public money, with public research institutes and universities at the centre of this monumental scientific endeavour (Safi, 2021). Scientific development went into overdrive, with the time between getting a vaccine from the design stage through the regulator slashed. However, following the suggestion

of Bill Gates, exclusive rights to vaccine manufacturing was given to a handful of pharmaceutical companies based in the West, preventing developing countries from manufacturing their own vaccines domestically following the formula developed using public money (Cullinan, 2021). This created what activists have called a ‘vaccine apartheid’ as high-income countries scrambled to buy up the (limited) available vaccine supply and place themselves at the front of the inoculation queue. Part of the problem is that intellectual property rights for drugs are enforced by the 1995 international trade law, the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). India and South Africa launched a petition to suspend the TRIPS Agreement for the duration of the pandemic, a proposal that was voted down by high-income countries who had already secured their vaccine supply. As of the end of March 2021, 30 countries had still not received a single dose of vaccine, hanging their hopes on the UN-backed COVAX programme (Glenza, 2021). However, COVAX is a charity and not a solution to the global vaccine rollout. Erin Hannah and her colleagues (2021) go as far as calling COVAX a smokescreen to cover up vaccine nationalism. In a sense, the vaccine rollout acts as a metonym for the pandemic as a whole, which on the surface promises to challenge the maladies of the current neoliberal period, but in fact ends up reproducing and intensifying the massive inequalities across regions, nations and intersecting axes of oppression, namely class, gender and race. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Latin America.

### **COVID-19 in Latin America**

As explained above, Latin America has been hit particularly hard by the global pandemic, with countries unable to implement adequate policy responses to stop the spread of the virus and their underfunded and fragmented healthcare systems incapable of taking the strain caused by the virus. Despite some of the longest and harshest lockdown measures in the world in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, governments have proved unable to stop the spread of the virus. In fact, some of these countries were the hardest hit in the region in per capita terms, despite the virtually non-existent measures implemented in two of the region’s largest countries, Brazil and Mexico (Gideon, 2020: 4). I will explore some of the reasons for this in more detail below.

Latin American healthcare systems are woefully underfunded and have suffered because of attempts to bring in private healthcare providers. Average public health expenditure across Latin America sits at 3.7 percent of GDP, well below the OECD average of 6.5 percent, stymying public health responses to COVID-19 in the region (Lavinás, 2021: 3). Because of this, Latin American countries suffer from limited capacity in healthcare systems, experiencing shortages in ICU beds, ventilators, treatments drugs and medical personnel (Almeida, 2020). Writing in the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ), Lauren Paremoer and colleagues (2021) argue that increasing public health budgets to 5 percent of GDP is essential for building a fairer and more sustainable post-COVID world.

Paremoer and her colleagues also stress the importance of public initiatives above outsourcing healthcare services to for-profit providers, something that has constrained the public health responses in Latin America. Several authors have noted how Public Private Partnerships (PPPs)—one particularly prevalent form of outsourcing in the region—have led to fragmented healthcare systems ultimately unable to confront the exigencies of a global pandemic (Almeida, 2020; Benítez et al., 2020). For example, Camila Gianella, Jasmine Gideon and María José Romero, (2020: 9) show how, in the Peruvian case, ‘the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed, and even intensified, pre-existing weaknesses of the Peruvian health system... which have undermined the government’s ability to respond to the health crisis effectively and protect the most vulnerable’.

Beyond the public health response to the pandemic in Latin America, things are little better. Since 2013, many of the economic gains achieved by left-wing governments in the region, known collectively as the pink tide—GDP growth, raises in the minimum and average wages, falling poverty, inequality and informality—have been undone. This has only been compounded by the pandemic. According to data presented by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC, 2021), the Latin American and Caribbean region experienced the worst crisis on historical record during 2020, with the 7.7 percent drop in GDP and 20 percent fall in investment growth the harshest anywhere in the developing world. 2.7 million private firms shut, whilst the ranks of the unemployed swelled to 44.1 million people, many of whom would have been forced back into virus hotspots to undertake increasingly informalised types of work. Poverty levels exploded, from 30.3 percent of the region’s

population to 33.7 percent in under a year, whilst extreme poverty grew by 8 million people over the same period. Such was the size of the shock to Latin American economies that GDP per capita levels were set back a decade, undermining recent poverty reduction efforts. Confronted by this context, ECLAC (2020: 18) has called for Latin American countries to strengthen the welfare State to avoid another lost decade.

Extractivism remains the dominant form of capital accumulation in the region, with the economic damage from the pandemic exacerbated by shocks to global energy markets outlined above. Tobias Franz (2020) argue that the seven commodity-producing economies in Latin America (Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru) are facing a ‘switching crisis’, as capital abandons its investments in the region, leaving behind half-built and/or now-defunct infrastructure projects. These seven countries, contends Franz (2020: 8), are currently ‘facing a triple crisis: capital inflows suddenly stopped and even reversed, commodity prices massively decreased due to the fall in demand (particularly for oil) and local currencies drastically devalued’. Given the high level of dependence on extractivism in the region—labelled the ‘commodities consensus’ by Maristella Svampa (2013)—the economic outlook for Latin America does not look good, with many countries also at risk of defaulting on their sovereign debt (ECLAC, 2021). And this is to say nothing of the country home to the region’s largest petroleum reserves. Venezuela has been in a deep economic and political crisis since the fall of oil prices in 2014 and a humanitarian crisis since the implementation of US sanctions in 2017. Venezuelan migrants flows are increasing the stresses and strains placed on social and healthcare services by the pandemic, worsening the informality experienced by migrants and further limiting their access to healthcare (Zambrano-Barragán et al., 2021). In addition, migrants are among the populations most impacted by the heightened Covid-19 crisis across the region. Border closures and changes to migration policy across Latin America countries have interrupted migrants’ movement, leaving thousands without inadequate health care and stranded across the region, forcing some to return to danger and poverty from which they were trying to escape (Borjoquez et al. 2021).

The informal economy continues to be a source of livelihoods for much of Latin America, with ‘large sections of the region’s population are living in chronic



financial insecurity and are highly vulnerable to loss of labour income' (ECLAC, 2020: 4). The International Labour Organisation (2020: 48) estimates that in 2019, 53 per cent of all Latin American workers were employed informally. Persistent informality has forced individuals to carry the social and economic burden of the pandemic in the place of the state, which has proved either unwilling (as is the case in Brazil and Mexico) or unable (as is the case in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, the list goes on) to confront the pandemic in any meaningful systematic sense. In Chile, Magdalena Gil and Eduardo Undurraga (2020: 31) note that although 'people seem to understand the risk associated with COVID-19 and claim to be willing to comply with sanitary measures... the effectiveness of pandemic mitigation strategies depends not only on the willingness of the population to comply with them, but also on their ability to do so'.

Informality makes lockdowns nigh on impossible, pitting populations against public health officials. The region's informalised working-classes often find themselves between the Scylla of risking infection by going out to work and the Charybdis of staying at home and slowly starving to death. Moreover, the high instances of informal housing, with its poor sanitation and high population densities, make Latin American cities perfect breeding grounds for coronavirus. Informal workers and city residents (who are usually one and the same) are particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of the pandemic, with the informalisation of both the labour market and access to housing and other social services leading to deteriorating livelihoods and social inclusion (Zapata and Prieto Rosas, 2020).

The gendered outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America have been stark. Women already performed between 22 and 42 hours of unpaid domestic and care work per week before the crisis, with society-wide lockdown measures only increasing their reproductive workload. Over 70 per cent of healthcare workers in the region are women, who disproportionately find themselves on the frontline of fighting the virus (United Nations, 2020: 14). Furthermore, an unintended consequence of lockdown measures to stop the spread of the virus has been a spike in domestic violence, already a problem for one of regions worst affected by another pandemic, that of gendered violence. Call traffic on emergency helplines for women in Chile and Mexico jumped by more than 50 per cent during lockdowns, suggesting an intensification of gendered violence in

the region. Likewise, the reported disappearance of over 500 women in Peru during periods of lockdown shines a light on how widespread this phenomenon is in the region (Gideon, 2020: 5). This galvanised a response from, amongst others, local government and non-governmental organisations, which responded to the pandemic-related increased reports of domestic violence by expanding hotlines service with online resources and creating local networks to guarantee safe and rapid access to the appropriate support (Lima, 2020).

Finally, indigenous people are thought to be particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus, so much so that some are worried that the pandemic could spell the end for the regions more vulnerable groups (see, for example, Griffin, 2021). Across Latin America, indigenous people continue to be forced off their land as the agricultural and extractive frontiers eat into the Amazon rainforest. In Brazil, loggers and ranchers, emboldened by the government of Jair Bolsonaro, became increasingly belligerent in 2019, murdering indigenous leaders and accelerating dispossession. As the pandemic hit, the healthcare system of Manaus, the Brazilian city in the middle of the Amazon, collapsed in the face of the virus, a sign of the dangers that indigenous communities are confronted by. This is to say nothing of the millions of indigenous people who find themselves in informal settlements in the peripheries of Latin America's cities, dependent on the market of the informal economy to survive.

In short, the COVID-19 pandemic has manifested in Latin America as a multidimensional crisis cutting across all spheres of life. It has intensified existing crises of extractivism and its attendant political forms. It has illuminated the abandonment of entire populations under neoliberalism, when people were forced off the land and into the cities, and out of the factories and into informal work. And it has revealed the morbid outcomes of extreme racial and gender inequalities, as certain populations are marked as disposable bodies.

### **Contribution of the Special Issue**

Whilst the above contextualisation of the pandemic is essential for any analysis of the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 in Latin America, this special issue moves beyond the overview presented above to interrogate the current conjuncture from a wide range of different angles. Some of the authors explore how the pandemic

has intersected with existing inequalities of race and gender, shining light on the particular ways different groups have been affected in different contexts. Others place the scientific and medical expertise at the heart of the global response to the pandemic in its social context, underscoring the contingent character of knowledge. They also assess the new forms of politics forged in the fires of COVID hell and the embryonic political horizons that have burst forth under such intense heat and pressure. With this Special Issue, *Alternautas* hopes not only to offer fine-grained analyses of the view of the pandemic in Latin America from below, but also to point towards the opportunities for ‘doing something different’ that have long sat centre stage in Latin American debates over development.

The first couple of articles in the special issue address indigenous peoples and gender in Latin America during the COVID-19 pandemic. Maria Paula Andrade highlights how indigenous people have developed strategies of active citizenship in Brazil to confront the pandemic. Andrade assesses how indigenous groups have bundled discourses around the spread of COVID-19 together with their opposition to the extension of the extractive frontier into their territories, strengthening democratic values in the country and successfully using different juridical and political routes to shape the policy decisions of different layers of the Brazilian state.

In her contribution, María Belén Villegas Plá explains how ‘socioeconomic and health crises are not gender blind’, outlining in turn the gendered dimensions of increases in poverty, rising unemployment, and cuts to social provisions disproportionately used by women and children. Through exploring the gendered effects of fiscal policy, Villegas Plá forcefully argues against further austerity measures and for the need to think progressively about new gendered revenue and expenditure schemes.

Starting from misinformation on social media around the pandemic response of the World Health Organisation (WHO), Carolina Sotério takes a different tact. She traces the emergence of science as the basis for truth in post-enlightenment European philosophy to understand the world of fake news on Twitter. Sotério draws our attention to the importance of how knowledge circulates and the mechanisms through which public perceptions on how knowledge is produced can provoke different discourses around science at particular moments. She uses this discussion as an entry point to dissect the attacks on the WHO made by some

sections of Brazilian society, in the process offering possible future antidotes to the dissemination of fake news on social media.

In his contribution, Geoff Goodwin underscores how existing water inequalities have enabled the spread of the pandemic, preventing the most marginalised groups in society from following one of the most basic yet effective preventative measures: handwashing. Goodwin traces historical processes coproducing potable water systems in Ecuador through the Andean practice of communal labour, *mingas*. In doing so, Goodwin draws our attention to the unevenness of access to clean water due to the patchwork public, private and communal systems of provision and to the ingenuity and strength of water associations. Goodwin argues that the pandemic has opened up new opportunities for co-produced communal water services, offering them as alternatives to privatised or centralised services that could map out a route to universal coverage of clean drinking water in Ecuador sometime in the near future.

Finally, César J. Pérez-Lizasuain offers a revolutionary re-reading of the tragedy of Oedipus, highlighting the need to look beyond the return to normality at the end of the pandemic and take a risk in order to usher in a new post-pandemic world. He underlines how types of ‘unsaid dispositifs’ obscure the production and reproduction of power, allowing for the status quo to endure. For this reason, the possibility of ‘going back to normal’ offered by actors in political institutions the world over should be rejected: returning to normality, he stresses, means returning to the precarity and austerity lived by working-class Latin Americans, of accepting the racial and gendered axes of oppression analysed by other contributors. In making this argument, Pérez-Lizasuain draws our attention to the new horizons of possibility opened by the pandemic, making the case for urgent political action.

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