

Exposed bodies, open houses.

Embodiment and domestic life during the pandemic scenario in urban middle classes in Buenos Aires (Argentina)

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Introduction

In this paper we analyze the transformative living conditions for middle classes in the City of Buenos Aires and Greater Buenos Aires in relation to the house and the body during these first two months of mandatory isolation. By gathering notes and records of our researches, we seek to problematize the visions that simplify the situation of confinement. The queries that organize the text are: What structural inequalities are revealed by this pandemic? Which modulations do middle-class people experience in the face of this?

The pandemic put our routines on hold. For middle classes, the environments were reconfigured due to the profound disruption of daily life and the resulting excessive digitalization of our relationships. The house and the body are the protagonists of isolation. On the one hand, we modified our diets, stayed at home, became more sedentary and made the screen the main means of communication. On the other, we tried to stay active by doing things around the house to be productive –decorating, fixing or just maintaining it– and exercising our bodies through various platforms. However, these are just two sides of a multi-layered confinement experience.

One of the most difficult conundrums for the experts was to research the material conditions of this situation strictly from digital media. We consider it more fruitful to add layers of understanding such phenomenon on a global scale, in this case from a local point of view. In this article we highlight the type of relationship that the pandemic condition has created for certain social groups of the metropolitan middle classes. It is important to emphasize that these experiences are not linear or exclusive nor do they exhaust the stories of these social sectors.

Methodology

We study practices and imaginaries around the body and the spaces that urban middle sectors inhabit. Although the article was written jointly using the first person in plural, the two ethnographic experiences arise from our own individual doctoral researches: the one linked to the body and sport practices is derived from the work of Nemesia Hijós with runners and amateur athletes in training groups in the City of Buenos Aires, and the one referring to the house and ways of living in Haedo (Province of Buenos Aires) is based on María Florencia Blanco Esmoris study. We recognize ourselves as part of the socio-cultural universe we analyze. For this reflection we use field notes taken from March to May 2020.

To comprehend these experiences, we take up Rosana Guber's (2001) proposal to conceive ethnography as a focus, method, and text because with this instrument, we can understand the meanings, practices and imaginaries that are significant to our interlocutors. The personal and trusting relationships that each one of us has been developing for years was the matrix that made it possible to continue with these links even in the context of physical isolation. As a result of this scenario, our fieldwork became netnography or digital ethnography (Hine, 2000; Miller & Slater, 2000): now, "listening can imply reading or perceiving and communicating in other ways, we can observe and be observed at the same time, ethnographic note-taking can be replaced by videos, audios, photography or blogs" (Ekdale and Pink in Di Próspero and Daza Prado, 2019, p. 66) (own translation). As a digitally mediated study, we made a virtual follow up of the publications and comments of our interlocutors and the field, with the aim of seeing how they are stressed and complemented with the surveillance postulates of the productivity paradigm. In addition, we surveyed the WhatsApp group dialogues to identify the agency capacity of the people with whom we work.

First stage: the uneven pleasure of privilege

For several people, the announcement of the mandatory isolation¹ was at first experienced as a backwater. An opportunity to do what had not been done at home. The vertiginousness of the beginning led many to romanticize their being at home while others, without the same conditions of life and access to resources lived in hell. The experience is deeply unequal and heterogeneous, even more in a country with a north-south extension of 3,700 km. Also, with a City of Buenos Aires and Buenos Aires Province with a total of 17.196.396 of inhabitants by 2018².

In the middle classes to do home office and get paid, to spend some time with the family, to be able to organize a wardrobe is a privilege that others do not have. Productivity and self-governance

¹ On 20 March 2020 at 00hs Argentina began a mandatory quarantine established by the National Decree 297/2020. Since then the Decree has been renewed every fifteen days with minimum flexibility in accordance with needs of force majeure. Citizens are only able to make minimum and essential trips to stock up on cleaning supplies, medicines and food. Source: <http://servicios.infoleg.gob.ar/infolegInternet/anexos/335000-339999/335741/norma.htm>

² Source: <http://www.estadistica.ec.gba.gov.ar/dpe/index.php/poblacion>

intersect with the fear of getting fat as an undesirable effect of quarantine. Social control and surveillance also represent the flip side of this pandemic. There are those who moralize their neighbors for going up and down the stairs or for using the terrace for gymnastics. At the same time, we are forced to adapt and continue. Privilege has many faces including success and failure stories. For Rosa, the pandemic destroyed her business of selling beauty and hair care products. She used to sell products to the gym mates and now her entrepreneurship was ended by the isolation. Although she tried to go through this "as best as possible" her living conditions profoundly deteriorated. Gloria, a married housewife with three children, made staying at home "a positive thing": she took the opportunity to order clothes and arrange those things she had never been able to do with her husband Ariel.

For those who have an organized routine, confinement was a readaptation to their lives in continuous movement, a (new) challenge. The available bodies begin to be part of other habits. Runners racing in one-room apartments show off their skills. Those who reaffirmed their identity through exposure to risk become the stars of the news during this stage: amateur athletes –without limits– who complete 42 kilometres on 7 m² balconies, cyclists who violate quarantine and are filmed pedaling in the mountains, influencers and communicators who finish triathlons in their backyards to encourage the awareness of staying at home. In this first stage, there was a massive availability to a number of gym routines, fitness classes, and training videos, for free. The new modalities of communication and transmission place us in front of a supposed democratization of the contents. This has a basis in a neoliberal context with capitalism pressures that still force us to keep moving, to adapt, to surpass ourselves and not give up. Some do not allow themselves to be "unproductive" or enjoy leisure without feeling guilty.

While some can stay at home others give their lives: health and service employees, security forces, and politicians seem to be always awake helping people. Others, the most invisible: the garbage collectors, the workers in the popular economy, the women who take care of children and elderly at home are still at the backstage of this scenery. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the obligatory quarantine in Argentina a collective applause was installed at 9pm to recognize the health workers. As the days and weeks went by, we began to feel that we no longer occupied the street. In that sense, March 24th, National Day of Memory for Truth and Justice marked a watershed. We were not at Plaza de Mayo. Bodies were not there; social movements flags were not flapping and the Grandmothers and Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo –Mothers of the disappeared– expressed their cause through media actions.

In short, for some it was a first stage with a positive view of the confinement while for others it was perceived as an unpleasant time to manage themselves. A strong presence of the State organizing and controlling the citizens in the everyday routine was well received. Now, houses are the trenches in which to resist the vicissitudes of pandemics. Who are those who can continue with their lives even in these contexts? The differences in these adaptations reveal inequalities in the material conditions of existence.

Second stage: zoomties, multiple applauses and struggles

Over time, people had to manage loneliness. There is no privacy or intimacy anymore. Feelings that sharing via virtuality is no longer enough. How can we get used to these exchanges? Personal events that must adjust to the "new normality". Zoom birthdays and zoom parties (zoomties) are followed by the proliferation of other virtual parties like the Bresh Party³ or even DJ's broadcasting from their homes for free. It seems middle classes were not having such a bad time. The idea of being part of something bigger also broke through in this context with the proliferation of different kinds of applause.

The other face of this is tiredness. Those who used to organize their weekly schedules around some physical activity outdoors are now desperate to get back to their old routines. At the same time, there are many populations at risk. People affected by socioeconomic inequalities and those who are at risk due to the COVID-19, for example: the elderly. There are those who see altruism as a realm. Gloria took the opportunity to organize and donate clothes to various social organizations. Luisa, a dentist in her sixties, helped to viralize virtual food drives while taking care of her mother. A type of solidarity and collective actions was virtualized and expanded "indoors".

Previously the digitalization of life seemed to be an opportunity to stay closer, now people are starting to be worn out by the screens. The streaming of fitness classes no longer has the same participation as before. The supposed democratization and openness stopped. Gym chains started to transform to virtual modalities to bill for their services. The sale of alcohol and flour increases worldwide⁴, gym chains notice the declines in memberships and coaches are looking for strategies to continue earning money. Demonstrations in Florida to open the gyms. Runners are asking to go for a run. Supposed flexibility, less police on the street, people want to go out, they feel and weigh the control, the lack of sociability. Is this a new episode of the Black Mirror series?

The second stage was characterized by a loss of the romanticization or positive view of the quarantine. The proliferation of inequalities with respect to lifestyles and housing became evident. The times overlap. We are supposed to deal with the hyper-availability of offers that overwhelm our spaces. Bodies began to see the limit of over-demanding work and exercise at home as others struggled to keep up with the competition demands. Gradually the announcements by various state agencies were made in terms of a progressive self-control of citizenship. While the street as a public space of dispute and collective sense is fading away. Solidarity actions began to gain strength from social networks in a world that is no longer the same.

³ More details about this event on Instagram: @fiestabresh

⁴ In Argentina, the sale of flour increased 70% and sales of baked goods in bakeries fell between 50% and 60%. Source: <https://twitter.com/ReutersLatam/status/1250643787040411649?s=20>

Conclusions: the third stage bis

The metropolitan areas in Argentina continue in what the experts and government advisors called Phase 3 Geographical Segmentation⁵. Unlike other places in the country that are starting to overcome isolation, in Buenos Aires we are still in a partial confinement. People sleep badly, their bodies do not resist a continuous demand that is not structured in the parameters that are known. There is no possible future unless it is organized under the active observation of the multiple experiences. In this new stage the lack of self-control and the tedium of intimacy is exacerbated. As we said, only those who work in essential services and now, other professionals and commerce employees can leave their houses. Education and daily life continue to be carried out behind closed doors. A large number of cases have been registered in the slums and settlements due to: overcrowding dwellings and the lack of access to rights and essential resources linked to water, electricity or health. Every crisis has its contradictions and disputes.

In this article we present two moments –not linear or continuous– that allow us to account for different temporal passages in articulation with the home, ourselves and with the State in the pandemic experience. In Buenos Aires we were forced to live an unbearable physical distance. Since then we have other routines: there are people we no longer see, there are streets we do not walk, *mate* we do not drink, physical activities we exacerbate inside doors and more than ever houses that we transform. We turned spaces into places, even virtual ones. The State appears in many ways: controlling and observing, managing, and proposing our self-control.

In Argentina, some intellectuals talk about what is to come as a "new normality", the formal name of Phase 5. However, the risk of using the terms to name the transformation of daily lives caused by the isolation also precludes us from thinking about the changes that arrive after the pandemic (ATP). From the social sciences lens, it is important to give ourselves tools and critical reflections about a profound inequality that still runs our country. This vertiginous reality cannot withstand any analysis. Prudence will rest on the analytical distance we can take from these events in the future.

The State itself takes up health care slogans to suggest the citizens to remain vital. The imperative of being in movement and the premise of taking advantage of time challenges us. But like the bricoleur: we do what we can with what we have. We build with leftovers. It is true that many of the experiences we show refer to middle classes in Buenos Aires but does not imply they are less valuable. Many of them widen the margins amid this contingency. In this world, even with the differences, we still are undergone by an unequal and perverse system that requires us to “be active”.

⁵ "Taking into account the different epidemiological situations that are observed within the country and even within the same jurisdiction, the formal requests presented by governors and governors, and the recommendations established by the national health authority, the personnel affected by certain activities and services, or the people who live in specific and delimited geographical areas, will be exempted from compliance with the social, preventive and obligatory isolation and prohibition of movement. Each provincial jurisdiction must issue the necessary regulations for the development of the exempted activity, and may limit its scope to certain geographical areas or municipalities or establish specific requirements for its development, taking into account the local epidemiological situation and the characteristics of the place, in order to minimize the risk of spreading the virus" (own translation). Government source: <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/coronavirus/aislamiento/buenosaires>

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