

Exchange and Pandemics

By Mateo Grati

Perspective/Background:

As different as countries can be.

While Norway has slightly more than five million citizens Argentina approaches forty five million, with seven times more surface area and seven times less GDP per capita.

Oslo is a rather small big-city, close to reaching seven hundred thousand inhabitants, it's streets even though not quiet, are far from loud, with car horns being a rarity and everyone conducting their businesses in an orderly manner.

It took me a while to get used to cars stopping completely to let me cross the street. And getting over the awkwardness of taking longer to cross out of pure bewilderment (it is likely that I will get run over when I get back)

Tranquility in Buenos Aires is even rarer than car horns in Oslo. Not having enough with the rage filled street noises, people appear to be loud by default. And that's the tip of the iceberg when it comes to differences.

The way we manage physical contact is just opposite (and this has been a year with a lot of talk about the management of physical contact) In Argentina people greet each other and say goodbye with a kiss on the cheek. This has costed me a fair share of awkwardness as well¹. Being here, I have realized that anything is a good excuse for physical contact back home, just standing next to someone might earn them a slap on the back, or a hug over the shoulder if you are a bit more confident. This is a big No-No in Norway, the country that practiced social distancing before a pandemic occurred.

On a side note, anecdotes from Norwegians who have visited Buenos Aires and their view on it have been an unexpected pleasure. Awkwardness is abundant in those stories as well.

In terms of more structural differences, Norway's health care system excels worldwide, it's high level quality, primary health care focus and indiscriminating accessibility make it an example for the world to follow. Argentina juggles in between a divided public sector (always overwhelmed and underfunded), social security and private medicine. These subsystems are poorly interconnected and it's management and heterogeneity are the cause of great inequality. For my easy-to-surprise eyes, some of the hospitals I've had the pleasure to take clinical practice at seemed more like Hotels rather than healthcare facilities (I'm not even going to touch upon the normality with which med students see robots passing through the hospital floors and ask, to my awed face, if we don't have those in South America)

I came here with an idea based on vague stereotypes that these countries were far apart in most of the aspects that shape daily life, and even more so in all the others.

After my first weeks stepping into the Scandinavian world I reinforced some of these biased beliefs, even mentioning to some friends that Oslo and Buenos Aires are as different as two western cities can be. I would take that back now.

¹We understand this is not corona-appropriate and have stopped, do not panic.

Don't get me wrong, there is a never ending list of differences that can be pointed out without much effort, but the things that spontaneously caught my attention were the similarities.

The eagerness to be done with exams, the uncaring laughter from groups of people sitting in the grass, the annoyed faces of wet pedestrians under the rain, the awkward smirks of drunk students that looked so rigid that same morning.

"Culture is just a mask, people are the same everywhere" were the wise words from a drunk British guy I met at a Bar on my only working night there.

Living in a culturally different place is arguably the main idea when going on exchange, with its challenges and joys. Millions of people have gone through this and some of those, friends of mine, have shared their experience with me and given me tools to face this. But the only tools we have to face the situations we are in now are the ones we create as we go.

The point of this essay is to try to give some structure to the new reality I/we were faced with and how it has reshaped those challenges and joys, and in the end how the consequences of this will project on our future from an individual and social standpoint.

You are going on exchange? it's going to be the best experience of your life!

There is an unquestioned collective idea that going on an exchange (specially a long and far away one) is one of the most enjoyable and memorable experiences one can go through. No doubt privileged as well.

All of this is true, I wouldn't argue against it even now, I'd say it's a matter of the lightness with which it is brought up what might make things messy. Everyone reacts with similar expressions to the news of your going away, smiles, happiness, demands for lots of pictures. People that came back mention how they envy you, wish they were still abroad and touch upon all of what you should do.

Not noticing it, you and your exchange have a huge expectation to live up to. You need to meet thousands of diverse people you'd never meet at home, visit places you'll never have the chance to see again, take social network-blowing pictures of your huge overseas smile, you have to not ever want to come back.

I have enjoyed myself a lot, and hope to do it more, I am certain that my memories from Oslo will be with me for a long time, and exchange is an unquestionable growing experience.

I'm also certain that upon thinking it for one second no one could expect so much from any one thing in life. The problem is that we seldom stop to think about it, and all these expectations collide with reality in funny ways.

Time goes by over pictures and recommendations about what to do when speaking with acquaintances and friends that where here, recommendations of jackets, socks and the cheapest beer brand you can find at the supermarket. Makes me wonder why there was so little mention of the dragging bureaucracy one has to go through when moving abroad (and Norway's fixation with involving the mail in everything²).

²If there is a lesson I can leave for posterity it's; DO NOT confuse your address while registering with the police.

The point is that you won't enjoy every second of your life no matter how much of an exchange enthusiast you are and even if you are not demanding that from yourself you'll notice that you won't be able to keep up with what you might've pictured. Not everything will be perfect, some experiences will probably be forgettable, as any random night back home could have been. You'll find yourself feeling like you don't want to say yes to every plan that presents itself. Feelings of guilt can ensue, questionings as well. Am I just waiting opportunities? Will I be able to say that everything was so incredible? That I have seen and met and enjoyed all of what I was supposed to? Am I failing? Is it even possible to fail an exchange?

Wait, what's happening?

It still feels weird, funny, remembering January and reading a news headline on the second or third page of the newspaper about a virus in China. In February, having a class on global health and talking about how humanity has few mechanisms to face a devastating pandemic, "we do not believe that corona-virus is this though". Video-call my worried mother and tell her that this was not so serious, that in Argentina they worry about a disease spreading in China while we pile up dead from tuberculosis and dengue.

When I think about what is happening I always come back to this idea of the universalization of things. Of a not sought after collective attunement, but I believe that no one can avoid that feeling of frenzy when thinking about the time that passed between the beginning of the year and now. What happened two months ago feels like six, what happened four months ago like a year. I don't think it's just this distortion in our perception of the time that we share.

Questions, debates, reproaches have spread and repositioned in the foreground. I am not going to say axioms, because we will see that there are always those who question them (objectively I would also question the reflections of a medical student on the international geopolitical scene), but speaking with epistemological language, I would say that we have gained more confidence in some socioeconomic statements.

It has become clear that the world's development model is closer to fixed-term suicide than to an unstoppable engine of production.

That this crisis has not generated so many de-novo problems, but rather exposing the underlying ones. It has exacerbated injustices and strained systems that were cracking under an ephemeral frenzy of news and media coverage that partially hid those cracks.

And it has brought to light how the unequal distribution of wealth in the world is not a problem that developing countries have to tackle on their own, but a product of a global system that won't function anymore as it permits some states to survive while others perish. The injustice, as many others is a man made issue that has to be addressed if we have any hope that the post pandemic world will be better than the previous one.

There may no longer be many colonies, empires or puppets, but there are resources. Resources that guarantee access to health in the form of sanitary infrastructure, in the form of vaccines and remedies, in the form of work and decent living conditions. Resources that reopen economies, which

widen the gap between countries that are spiraling down and countries that return to their new normality.

But what is done with this difference? How does an increasingly globalized world continue to spin in front of abruptly closed borders and abysmal differences in recovery capacity?

The European Union reopens itself, timidly some air routes are reestablished, tourism is normalized among select countries that show early control and recovery. Meanwhile Latin America fails to stop the inertia that crumbles it regardless of the diverse intentions of its diverse leaders.

Possible scenarios include drawing new borders, a virulent curtain separating infected and uninfected blocks, and inequality increasing terribly. This sounds much more likely than a collective epiphany that will lead world leaders to understand that the world economy they treasure so much cannot exist like this.

Locked up:

I never know how to answer my friends when they ask how's the quarantine here. I want to say there isn't one and they feel tempted to envy me. They have been stuck inside their houses (it has been around 90 days of lock-down in Buenos Aires by now) with the only chance of stepping outside being to go to the grocery store or pharmacy while I have all the freedom to go for a hike in the forest and enjoy an increasingly sun-drenched weather.

Group chats have partially become a support system where everyone brings up their dealing with the stress and frustration caused by the lockup and in so making it a shared burden. It is tough for them to be a source of support for each other as they seek that same support themselves.

I have most of what they crave right now, and guilt does find me as well when I realize I am unable to be happy with that. Even though I can step outside whenever I want to, and there is a beautiful country on the other side of my door I have yet to explore, I can't find the motivation to do it on my own.

I could blame the stress of bills, of losing the job I depended on, the sudden purposelessness of my staying here, there is no denying that any or all of them could plague my mind. But being honest, it's just loneliness that gets me. Of course the social responsibility of staying isolated as much as possible is something that everyone takes seriously as well and has a great impact on our lack of human warmth. Yet I cannot avoid the drainage of will loneliness causes.

My friends long to step outside and envy me for it, I envy that when they step out they'll be able to hug each other again. Sadly enough the last loving hugs I had were the goodbye ones to the great friends I made here and were called back, most of whom I'll probably never see again.

We live now in a state of continuous present, without certainties of what the future will be like, and a recent past that through force of homogenization has become an amorphous mass impossible to dissect, and for most, purposeless to dissect

Confinement inside four walls is what this pandemic has meant for most exchange students, given it's all the housing we have, virtually without risk for our own physical health we must compromise our mental one for the common good, more to that we should try and be examples of

social compromise being the future generation of health professionals. Putting more strain and responsibility in sustaining this situation.

In this situation, I have come to the realization that I'm lucky to have the pictures from my friends I brought from Argentina, the two daffodils I got (one given away for free outside Kiwi, the other one purchased at a sale by friends) and the couch we found next to a dumpster a month ago which gives our kitchen some sort of homelike warmth. You run from home on exchange just to create that sense of "homeness" somewhere else. Maybe that's why exchange is such an insightful thing.

The worst part about the end of the world is that it doesn't end. The consequences of the pandemic just drag on, and it seems stupid obvious when said out loud, but the stress, the hardships, the extra effort, most (and it's huge that just most and not all) can pull that weight but the strain feels like twice as much when there is no apparent end to all of this.

We need an aim, a date look ahead for.

But probably there is not and contrary to its abrupt soreness, the pandemic does not disappear suddenly, but rather that its consequences dissolve slowly and widely.

We still have to discover all the ways in which this pandemic will affect us. We find new manifestations of its effects as fast as we can enunciate them and new revelations feel like old and elemental within a couple of months of time.

One of the worst vices I fall into when writing is expressing everything in medical terms, everything is diagnostics, prognosis, symptoms and risk factors. In this case I can't stop thinking about "adaptive changes".

The most notorious is that of calmness in the face of uncertainty. Contrary to the fury of the first days of paperwork and appointments, of documents, studies and bureaucracy that had us in a constant state of alert, of imminent action in the face of an avalanche of problems to solve. Now everything stays still.

Actually everything is even more chaotic, but my mind stays still. Laws, decrees, borders opening and closing, everything moves far faster than our small capacity to plan ahead. To redo university schedules, extend or cancel rent contracts, get flight tickets, it all goes through the window while we are practically stranded ten thousand kilometers away from home (not a bad place to be stranded at though). It has been a while since my plane ticket was canceled, that my bank account is delayed, that my accommodation for the next month is uncertain and my future work too, I don't even want to check the date of my residence permit's expiry date. Three months ago with just missing a shift in Skatteetaten I was already pulling the hair out of my head, now I'm almost laughing at the easiness with which I list all the problems surrounding me.

Of course I am worried, but worried has stopped being an opposite to calmness.

I have several ongoing hypotheses as to why this is. The easiest and most universal is; everything is above us, what happens exceeds me in so many orders of magnitude that after collapsing myself for a while it is easier for me to wait quietly while everything else collapses around me, even if they are my plans, prognoses and diagnostics.

Another theory that goes along the same lines is that of that common phrase "how minuscule are my problems compared to the rest of the world" which I have always found a rather useless, everyone's problems are personal and valid to the individual that goes through them. But now that shallow phrase feels a little more comforting. Perhaps because the pain of the world is more abundant

and closer, more palpable. In order to empathize you have to be able to imagine, and now it is difficult not to. And empathy is central to all of this and to my main hypothesis about managing frustration and anxiety.

I once met a hitchhiker that had been traveling on his own for a year, he told me that one can only get rid of the expectations that others project upon him and of the role that one begins to occupy structurally in the circles that one inhabits by leaving those circles and expectations. This guy was missing a leg, and despite this (or because of this) he needed to create a sense of himself outside the one others created for him.

This concept, although sometimes unnoticed, is a great engine that pushes exchange students. And the main source of perspective. At the same time, loneliness is something that many fear despite everything. And loneliness is something everyone definitely feels at some point while living abroad. I definitely fall into this group. It is something that I easily notice when thinking about the time I was here and how invariably my stay was better in those moments when I found bonds that gave me containment and a feeling of security to be able to cope with everything. A feeling of home.

That was the first strong blow corona-virus inflicted upon us. After arriving, of being expectant, nervous, lonely, everyday conversations and meetings in hallways and kitchens were built into friendships, into confidence and affection, into the comfort of a caring hug. And as soon as we began to feel at home most of the people had to go back and those first comforting hugs became goodbye ones.

The period that followed that was most challenging. Listening to suitcases on the sidewalk and seeing the corridors increasingly empty, a time were most had to go back to the safety of their homes while the little home we had built was falling apart. And with it the possibility of building another one was over. Suddenly isolated from all affection. We were fortunate to soon return to a normality that was very close to the old, where a little contrary to what was intended everyone opened up to more friends. That was a curious phenomenon, how suddenly everyone had a predisposition to talk to new people and that desire for bonding was shared. I think a lot about this contrast of escaping from home to new experiences only to go build a new feeling of home somewhere else.

Now I believe that this perspective, that growth one gets on exchange, does not come from isolation, or from escaping from the pre-established. They are a product of having to build a new structure to inhabit from scratch, on our own and in a much more diverse context.

Conclusions:

The volatility of this era is so intense that much of what I wrote at the beginning of this essay lost validity or mutated. Other ideas have grown and branched out, some have taken more strength.

That the world resists change, that the consequences will be long and blurred before reaching our old concept of normal life. That these consequences discriminate against countries, and that discrimination will be based not only on the decisions of their leaders, but also on the structural and economic capabilities they had.

That a vaccine can also appear and render all this speculation obsolete. And it is really impossible to predict what will happen no matter how unlikely.

On a more individual level, I would say that many of those first anxieties of going on exchange begin to die when one starts to form a feeling of being home. That the best advice you can get doesn't have to do with the place you visit, or where to shop, but it has to do more with the purchase of plants and some decoration being a good investment. And that making friends who care for you are always in the forefront.

That our existence depends on life in society, that being able to live this social lives is a privilege rather than unmovable normality and because of this it needs to be remodeled and cared for. That this life in society is actually the life of others intertwined with us, and that there are few decisions we make that do not have an impact on this network, such as existing a meter away from each other. And that this simple choices such as to go out or not can change the course of countries.

Common to many things regarding this crisis, all the points I've noted are about issues that already existed or interactions that were so prior to being exalted and made noticeable by the strain they were put through.

Empathy is the main value to impart and promote. We also know that there will always be nuclei of people who will resist all evidence and hold dangerous beliefs. And that the only way to deal with this is through dialogue and that antagonizing only radicalizes and feeds this divisions. That these individuals can be world leaders and that at the international level the only way to encircle and handle this dangers is through dialogue in the form of fluid and abundant international cooperation.

That scientific education is always lacking in a world where everything goes through science and culturing individuals with knowledge on critical thinking, reasoning and epistemology is a long term investment for more rational societys.

We/I realized thorough the persistent loss of human warmth how much we can connect to the reality of the human beings on the other side of a phone, no matter how far away or scattered throughout the world they are (how this is possible by imagination and empathy going hand in hand). And that the other side of the world is close by, on the other side of a screen or twelve hours sitting on a plane. That the people that surround us, a couple of photos and flowers, a supermarket in which we walk knowing were everything is, a bus we can mindlessly ride, are a home everywhere.

That this engine of change fueled by an unexpected event that is reshaping our lives and will determine what is made of this world when this passes is composed, like everything else, by people like us, by us. And that its persistence depends on our commitment and involvement and that the more we are, the easier it is, the better it is.