

Dispatches from Portugal and the Philippines: Notes on Student Pandemic Life



Paris May 10, 2021

by Robert Junqueira and Hadje Cresencio Sadjé

I. Portugal Against COVID-19: The Case of the University of Coimbra

As a student at the Institute for Philosophical Studies of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Coimbra, I am poised to provide a circumscribed report centered on my institutional abode. The ongoing pandemic proved no less harrowing in Portugal than anywhere else in the world. Policymakers and the governing bodies of the different institutions were urged into action, and the various parts of society were called upon for a coordinated effort to face a menace that, in addition to being lethal, is not visible to the unaided eye. It would seem that in order to speak about this viral incursion, recourse to a militaristic or martial discourse is necessary. In this “war” of everybody against the virus—perhaps the first World War in which all nations find themselves in the same trench—the whole scholarly community has been summoned to serve. At the University of Coimbra, the community at large answered the battle cry. The higher studies at Coimbra were **adjusted promptly**, and all necessary precautions were taken to ensure that compliance with the curricula would be minimally compromised. Despite the prevailing belief that distance learning falls short of the lofty mission of education, it was through the use of digital media and plenty of dedication that the university succeeded in securing, over consecutive lockdowns, a steady track to keep the train moving.

Despite all possible efforts that were undertaken, online learning, on its own, made it difficult for students to concentrate on what was being lectured. Moreover, the awareness of the gravity of the moment enhanced the psychological weariness of learners. Who could have been prepared for unabating reports of staggering numbers of deaths? How could anyone listen carefully enough to the voice of a professor speaking through a display about the wonders of ancient philosophy, immediately after watching photographs depicting dozens of caskets being prepared for victims of the viral spread? Coimbra students showed up in large numbers to the virtual classrooms where classes were held. Unfortunately, I dare say, few enjoyed the benefits of the transmitted knowledge. Since the Coimbra PhD in philosophy has no curricular program, being entirely consecrated to the writing of the thesis, the problems that my philosophy colleagues and I came across were rather peculiar. All the same, we still endured the inaccessibility of working environments, such as libraries, and the absence of companionship, not to mention this whole human misery which is still unfolding.

Starting in March 2020, the university implemented a hybrid lecturing model. It was only in the second half of April 2021 that on-site sessions were resumed, in line with government recommendations. Wearing a mask remains mandatory. To ensure the safety of the community, daily testing procedures for COVID-19 have been tightened. The screening center at the University of Coimbra is now prepared to perform a thousand tests per day. Numerous checkpoints for measuring temperature were set up and general guidelines for being present in university spaces were defined. Each measure follows the directives and standards of the World Health Organization (WHO), the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), National Contingency Plan (Plano de Contingência Nacional, PCN), and the instructions emanating from the Portuguese Directorate-General of Health (Direção-Geral de Saúde, DGS). The UCare emotional support line has been launched to provide the university community with assistance in developing time and anxiety management strategies while in confinement. Furthermore, the deadlines for submitting reports

and dissertations have been lengthened for MA and PhD students, and those who are in seclusion are being given the possibility to have meals delivered directly to their doorsteps.

Founded in March 1290, the University of Coimbra is among the oldest universities still operating in the world today. It was here that leading figures of late scholasticism such as Pedro da Fonseca, Francisco Suárez, and Manuel de Góis lectured, during the period that came to be known as early modernity, a time when the Portuguese crown ruled over a colossal overseas empire. It could be contended that for a few decades (1581-1640) it was not the Portuguese crown, but the Spanish, which controlled the Portuguese imperial territory. Not true. One should bear in mind that Philip II of Spain was not admitted as Philip I of Portugal before undertaking to maintain the customs, and prerogatives of the Portuguese. There was, unquestionably, an Iberian Union, but the distinction between the two kingdoms was never abolished. The Kingdom of Portugal fought the plagues of 1569 and 1579 on its own, and the subsequent plagues, during the Philippine dynasty, cannot be considered part of the history of the Spanish plagues either: the 1598 plague was as much of a Portuguese misfortune as the ones that followed the restoration of independence, namely the 1646, 1649, and 1680 plagues. Just as Portugal struggled against Spain for its independence, the peoples under Portuguese rule strove to seize the reins of their own affairs. Over the centuries, the gradual and hard won emancipation of colonized nations did not prevent the Portuguese tongue from becoming one of the major idioms worldwide—nowadays the sixth most spoken language—with approximately two hundred and forty million speakers all over the planet. Like plagues, languages have a certain viral component, they spread...

Yet, to mention Portugal is also to mention the European periphery, and the nation's financial vulnerability portends a rather hefty hangover in the wake of the global nightmare of this pandemic. The extreme right-wing movement is on the rise in Portugal, appearing as a lifeline to those who, amidst many difficulties, are deceived by the songs of vultures dressed up as goldfinches. To

the left and to the right, the political establishment has not been able to provide an adequate response. Its best idea was to try to outlaw the political party that currently represents the extreme right in the parliament, thereby actually encouraging the victimization discourse and consequent media attention. The present government in Portugal started out with all the conditions in place to do an excellent job, yet it has been somewhat disappointing. Undoubtedly, its governance has been hampered considerably by the effects of the pandemic emergency, but some shortcomings are beyond reason. Suffice it to say that this government does not regard it as a priority to inoculate university teachers.

II. Crisis on Crisis: Variations on the Pandemic from the Philippines

In 2020, according to a World Bank report, the global pandemic threatened to push 72 million more children into learning poverty. A follow up report from five months later confirmed the worst case scenario. Based on the UNESCO [2021 report](#), “Over 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries were out of school.” It is clear how the global pandemic negatively impacts learners and educators. For example, “Over 100 million teachers and school personnel were impacted by the sudden closures of learning institutions. Today, half of the world’s student population (more than 800 million learners) is still affected by full or partial school closures. In 29 countries, schools remain fully closed.” (UNESCO, 2021). This brings to mind the current state of the Philippine institutions of higher education (HEIs).

In the Philippines, I have observed the pandemic devastate HEIs, both private and public. Nymia Pimentel Simbulan, the executive director of PhilRights (an independent human rights institution) **observed** that the impact of COVID-19 is deeply concerning, pointing out that the Philippine HEIs have had to adjust to the new situation and shift to virtual learning. The

language of burnout and disenchantment has become commonplace as many students struggle to keep up with online classes, especially those who lack socio-economic resources. In an internet zeitgeist such as ours, we take for granted that online education requires stability, in terms of housing, capital flow, and internet. Limited access to resources like high-speed internet (internet in the Philippines is notoriously slow), unavailability of textbooks, and errors in the learning materials are widespread, and pose barriers to meaningful learning. More importantly, limited social interaction with teachers and peers has greatly affected the quality of education, not to mention the fact that Philippine teachers were already overworked and, at the same time, underpaid. Likewise, according to Simbulan, the pandemic negatively impacts the mental health of both Philippine students and teachers. Although some view the current global health crisis as providing new opportunities, to others, it exposes and magnifies inequalities in Philippine higher education, especially when it comes to the dilution of the quality of education. Consequently, policymakers believe that the crisis will have a long term impact on the future of the Philippine labour force, which relies on skills gained through high quality and relevant education.

On May 2, I watched the incumbent President Rodrigo Duterte proclaim his decision to extend the current lockdown, including schools. As COVID-19 cases reached one million, many human rights groups placed President Duterte at the centre of the country's incompetent response to the spiralling pandemic. In fact, Duterte could begin to lift the public lockdown if vaccines could be made available publicly. This means that until there is a vaccine, schools cannot be reopened. Unfortunately, however, Duterte's administration, especially his presidential spokesperson, have placed the entire blame on the population for its noncompliance with health protocols, thus absolving themselves of any responsibility. I find this very problematic, insensitive, and irresponsible. I believe that Duterte's administration is diverting the nation's attention from real issues to emotive issues in order to cover up its incompetence. As the 2022 presidential election approaches, it would appear that Duterte's administration has an

alternative priority. Sadly, amid pandemic woes, the way I see it, Duterte's camp is solely bent on solidifying its support across the widest range of classes, especially in provincial areas. Consequently, and somewhat ironically, Duterte's administration seems to have no concrete, national plan to address the crisis. Instead of addressing the impact of the pandemic, Duterte's administration is using its anti-communism/anti-terrorism campaign, also known as the anti-insurgency campaign and anti-terror law, which includes widespread "red-tagging," to cover up its failures. Duterte's full-blown offensive (and yet another instance of a government employing martial discourse) via his anti-communism/anti-terrorism campaign has severe consequences, particularly for student activists, teachers, and administrations from various schools and universities. For example, many of my colleagues have been red-tagged, attacked, and harassed due to their critical and political views on Duterte's failed response to the pandemic crisis. They have told me that they received death threats from unknown sources. The government has exploited the pandemic to deepen its anti-critical stance.

Another diversionary tactic of Duterte's administration, although not entirely new, is the attack on the various Lumad (Philippine Indigenous groups) alternative schools. These schools are learning communities that are grounded in grassroots principles and provide alternatives to Western forms of education. One of their main goals is to advance self-determination by integrating the Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs) and Indigenous Learning Systems (ILS) into the curriculum. More importantly, the Lumad alternative learning centers represent a grassroots response to the Philippine government, both national and local, and its continued attempt to control and exploit ancestral lands, territories, and resources.

In my view, these diversionary tactics are among the most desperate acts performed by Duterte's government in its effort to mislead people and cover up the poor performance of his administration. Instead of providing concrete plans to ensure safe

and effective vaccination against COVID-19, Duterte's administration prioritized the anti-terrorism/anti-communism campaign by signing the controversial Philippine Anti-Terrorism Act 2020. Instead of providing strategies to support poor students, teachers, and school administrators, Duterte's administration escalated its political attacks on student activists, faculty members, and dissidents without presenting any evidence. And all of this as people go hungry and lose jobs.