

## Research Article

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# Cardboard Coffins and Vaults of Gold: Debt, Obligation and Scandal in Ecuador's Response to Covid-19

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**Abstract:** As the first cases of COVID-19 appeared in Guayaquil—foreshadowing one of world's most devastating outbreaks—the Ecuadorian government paid \$324 billion to bondholders, while forgoing much needed investment in pandemic preparation. This was the opening round for a series of struggles over the costs of containment and treatment of the virus; conflicts over debts foreign and domestic, taxes and corruption, wages and working conditions, and the control of public space. While the pandemic provided a context for the renegotiation of public and social obligations, however, the outcome was that the burden of pandemic containment was placed on those least able to sustain it—especially precariously employed, informal sector workers—deepening existing inequalities at the cost of lives and livelihoods. This paper addresses how this process was manifested through controversies in public culture, including traditional and social media, finding that the predominance of middle class and elite interests and preoccupations—together with the prevalence of scandal as a genre—sidelined the defense of popular lives and livelihoods and reinforcing systemic inequalities.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 (coronavirus), Political economy of Ecuador, Scandal, Public culture, Social movements in Ecuador.

“If we don't repay, lenders will not die. That is for sure. But if we repay, we are going to die. That is also for sure.” Thomas Sankara, President of Burkina Faso in 1987 (cited in Ross, 2013, p. 51)

## 1 Introduction

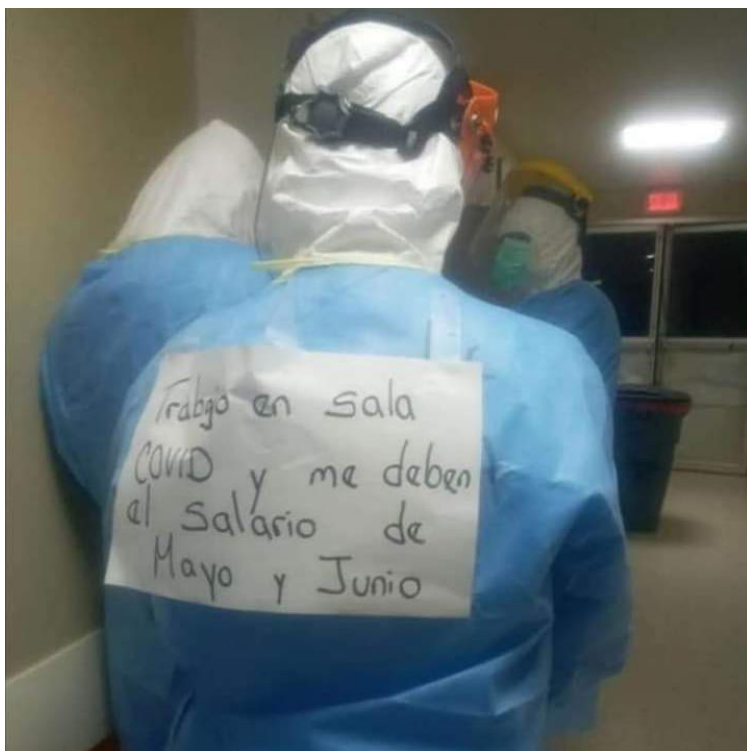
The eruption of COVID-19 in Guayaquil in March 2020 overwhelmed Ecuador's disorganized and unequal healthcare system, one further weakened by years of budget cuts (Badillo Salgado & Fischer, 2020). By the end of September, Ecuador would suffer 34,000 “excess deaths”—nearly 20,000 in May alone—making one of the world's deadliest COVID-19 outbreaks.<sup>1</sup> Even in the face of this devastating public health crisis, however, the national government prioritized payments to creditors while continuing to cut healthcare funding (Báez Valencia, 2020), as frontline workers went from working without protective equipment to working without pay (see fig. 1). Containment was left to a broad, strict, and long-lasting lockdown, which caused severe hardship even as it slowed the virus's spread. As Ecuador slid into a deep economic depression, those most affected were also those with the fewest resources with which to weather the storm, provoking a dramatic expansion of both poverty and inequality (Velasco Abad & Hurtado Caicedo, 2020).<sup>2</sup>

The deepening of existing inequalities occurred despite the fact that the crisis seemed, potentially, to call existing social relations and commitments into question. One of the most notable features of the COVID-19 pandemic has been

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**Figure 1:** “I work in the COVID ward and they owe me my salary for May and June”. Uncredited photo circulated on WhatsApp.

the way that the prospect of mass illness and death catalyzed the creation of new obligations (e.g., to remain at home or to wear masks) while also recasting existing ones (e.g., to pay wages, rents, and debts). In this article I consider how such obligations were renegotiated in Ecuador’s public culture, including traditional and social media, during the crucial first six months of the pandemic, in order to shed light on how inequalities were reproduced and deepened at the cost of so many lives and livelihoods. I steer clear of drawing direct lines from public opinion to policy—in many cases (such as the payment to the bondholders), it is the breach between them that is most notable. I focus instead on providing a critical reading of the ideological and cultural matrix that shaped the course of the pandemic as a jointly epidemiological and social process.

This article was researched and written in the city of Quito during approximately eight months of curfews and social isolation. It draws principally on digital and social media, including online newspapers and magazines, Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. Twitter trends were observed in real time as well as through searches through an online database.<sup>3</sup> These arenas of public and semi-public culture, which assumed increased importance during the lockdown, are also defined by their exclusions, beginning with the nearly half of Ecuadorians who lack internet access. I am guided here by the broadly Gramscian tradition of analysis of the relationship between cultural processes and the reproduction of material and social inequalities, informed by questions including: who are the intellectuals, broadly defined, that shape the course of public controversy; who has access to means of communication; what material issues are either emphasized or left out of the debate; and how the framing of debates supports or challenges the claims to resources and decision-making power of dominant groups (Crehan, 2016)<sup>4</sup>.

Public controversies reveal contradictions in the social order. But the capacity to create controversies and define the terms through which they are debated is unevenly distributed across the social hierarchy—which means that social contradictions that most affect subaltern groups often remain uncontroversial. There are also distinctions to be made amongst types of public controversies. “Scandals”, defined by the allegation of moral transgression by an individual or group, often predominate (Rajan, 2003; Tumber & Waisbord, 2019). While scandal can shed light on the moral standards and other assumptions behind accusations of wrongdoing, the classical Durkheimian view that scandals reinforce moral consensus by highlighting and sanctioning transgression has to be strongly qualified by a recognition

that they are also controversies that bring to bear distinct social interests and conceptions of right and wrong, and whose outcomes are often ambiguous.<sup>5</sup> Scandals are therefore better seen as projects of denunciation by particular social groups than affirmations of consensus (Tumber & Waisbord, 2019, p. 18). While social media has enabled more actors to participate in the production of scandals, systematic exclusions from both new and traditional media mean that, especially in societies marked by digital divides and functional illiteracy, the promotion of scandal remains another property of privilege, reflecting broader patterns of exclusion in civil society (Chatterjee, 2004).

While scandals lead to controversies, there is a tendency, in the opposition direction, to cast controversies as scandals—that is, to frame disputes through accusations of the moral impropriety of individual actors. While scandalization may work to make meaningful, moral sense of conflicts—recognizing that the evacuation of agency and responsibility through the figure of disembodied interests is also a way of covering for relations of domination—the focus on individual actions and established rules can take away attention from more critical appraisal of systemic relations, as I will argue here (see also Tumber & Weisbord, 2019, p. 12).

The focus on impropriety central to scandal also reflects a more general propensity to conduct disputes in the language of obligation. As Turner observed, “in the social drama...stress is dominantly laid upon loyalty and obligation, as much as interest” (1975, p. 35). Turner was compelled to emphasize this point because the centrality of long-term obligations to human social organization—and processes of contention—has been obscured by the imaginary of synchronous, tit-for-tat exchanges that has predominated in the social sciences since Adam Smith (Graeber, 2014). This is not to argue that the actors involved do not employ controversy to pursue individual and collective advantage—they certainly do—but that they very often use the language of obligation in doing so. In modern capitalist states, in particular, the representation of corporate class interests as universal interests—which Gramsci identified as the core of the hegemonic process (1971, pp. 282–283)—both reflects and encourages the tendency to frame disputes in terms of obligations to the common weal.

Public controversy in Ecuador during the first six months of the pandemic was largely dominated by scandals over corruption and the disposal of bodies. I have, however, highlighted other controversies that may have received less attention (as measured for example by Twitter trends), but are revealing regarding the relations of power and inequality that conditioned the renegotiation of obligations, or their material consequences. These include the controversy over the payment of public debt; debates about taxation; and controversies over comportment in public space, including scandals over the behavior of a young man known as “Lady Sidewalk” and the supposed problem of popular “indiscipline”.

While these controversies and scandals did not result in consensus, it is possible to say that certain claims predominated. The most consistent theme is that the powerful and privileged were able to resist the imposition of social obligations while shifting burdens onto subaltern groups: The obligation to creditors was affirmed over the obligation to protect health; those with money defended themselves against additional taxes, while workers were obliged to cede labor rights; public health restrictions fell on street vendors, rather than supermarkets. Perhaps the most emphatically defended popular claim was the right to a decent burial, and even that was often unrealized. Some predominant themes can be traced through these controversies, supporting the existing distribution of power and privilege: that taxes are a barrier to prosperity, and that inadequate public services are due to corruption rather than a lack of fiscal resources and austerity. That the Ecuadorian popular classes are “indisciplined”, whereas an idealized middle-class masculinity is associated with proper public conduct. That pointing to the daily life of systemic inequalities is unacceptable “class warfare”.

Certainly, this reflects in part that the forums for public culture in Ecuador are dominated by the middle classes and up. Subaltern politics therefore proceeds in other ways, including contentious protests and engaging in direct negotiation with the powerful (see Chatterjee, 2004). The exception that proves the rule is the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), which stands out for bringing subaltern (and not just Indigenous) perspectives into public debate during this period, although this is complicated by the organization's own class composition (Bretón Solo De Zaldívar, 2015), as well as the inherent difficulty of articulating subaltern politics (see Crehan, 2016). Its effectiveness, however, is rooted in the capacity of its member and affiliate organizations and sympathizers to put their bodies on the line in order to disrupt business-as-usual. Normally, however, relations of force and authority prevail, meaning that even where economic privileges are challenged in public culture (as in the case of Ecuador's debt payments), they are reaffirmed by the impunity of the agents of state and capital.

## 2 The State of Obligations in Ecuador

Whereas the liberal social imaginary has centered on synchronous exchange, social orders are at least as much organized around diachronous obligations—more or less formal, grounded in sanction or suasion, concrete and immediate or abstract and open-ended. Major social transformations, such as the emergence of states and of capitalism, have meant new kinds of obligations, especially debt and taxes (Graeber, 2014). The assumption by modern states of an obligation to foster health and welfare has been bound up both with the expansion of taxation and the creation of obligatory forms of comportment through law and discipline, often oriented toward the control of pathogens (e.g., Foucault, 1984). The COVID-19 pandemic brought these different kinds of obligations into a common field of contention: for example, insofar as social distancing was made more or less viable by subsidies, the obligation to stay home developed in tension with fiscal obligations of public debts and taxes placed on others.<sup>6</sup> In theory, in liberal-democratic states these obligations are defined through public deliberation and debate, although in practice systemic inequalities constrain and shape this process, as I will show here in the case of Ecuador's pandemic response.

Ecuador's state, class, and racial formation present major obstacles to the fulfillment of the state's constitutional obligation to provide free and universal health care. Like most American states, Ecuador taxes little, and barely if at all progressively. The healthcare system is segmented and stratified, in descending order of quality, between private providers, a public system for formal-sector workers, and another public system for everyone else. Despite a century of piecemeal public sector initiatives to provide access to healthcare (see e.g., Clark, 2015), the political will has never emerged for the mix of obligatory participation and taxation that would enable a comprehensive public system. As elsewhere in the Andes, public health concerns have been often centered on the comportment of the Indigenous and Mestizo popular classes, especially street and market vendors (Kingman Garcés, 2006; Weismantel, 2001), a pattern that continued to shape responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limited taxation, the instrumentalization of the state by finance, and the vagaries of dependency have contributed to a history of onerous and controversial public debt since independence (see Acosta, 2006).<sup>7</sup> Bank bailouts in 1999–2000 alone amounted to a staggering 25% of GDP (Toussaint & Millet, 2010, p. 91); by the early 2000's, debt payments greatly exceeded investment in social welfare. Debt has also been used as a lever for control over public policy, notably by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), whose conditionalities have contributed to both austerity and neoliberalization. The critique of these debt obligations was central to the countermovement to neoliberalism that emerged in force at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The government of Rafael Correa (2007–2017) established a commission to evaluate the legitimacy of public debt, leading to a repudiation of some obligations, and the constitution of 2008 created mechanisms to limit and provide public oversight of public debt.

Correa's government also engaged in a substantial expansion of the welfare state, including healthcare, by channeling the windfall of high oil prices and moderately increasing taxation. By 2014, however, oil prices had fallen and public debts were increasing again, largely fueled by Chinese loans that were "tied" to infrastructure projects of dubious quality. Correa's successor, Lenin Moreno, made the prosecution of corruption in public contracting by his predecessors a centerpiece of his presidency, while undertaking a hard turn back toward neoliberalism, reframing taxes as obstacles to growth, and characterizing the state as "obese". Tax cuts were accompanied by cuts to public services, while a growing fiscal shortfall was met by increasing indebtedness, including to the IMF. In return for a loan of four billion US dollars, the IMF obliged Ecuador to implement extensive neoliberal reforms and austerity, including the termination of fuel subsidies. The latter measure in turn sparked the largest, longest, and deadliest wave of protests in decades in October of 2019, resuscitating CONAIE as a leading political actor and re-establishing the potential of contentious popular mobilization. It was in the wake of this confrontation that Ecuador entered the COVID-19 pandemic—with an unpopular government, a stagnant economy, a healthcare system weakened by austerity, and a public debt of questionable legitimacy.



**Figure 2:** #LifeBeforeDebt. Call for National pot-banging demonstration against the payment of external debt and for strengthening public health on the 24 of March. Image circulated on WhatsApp.

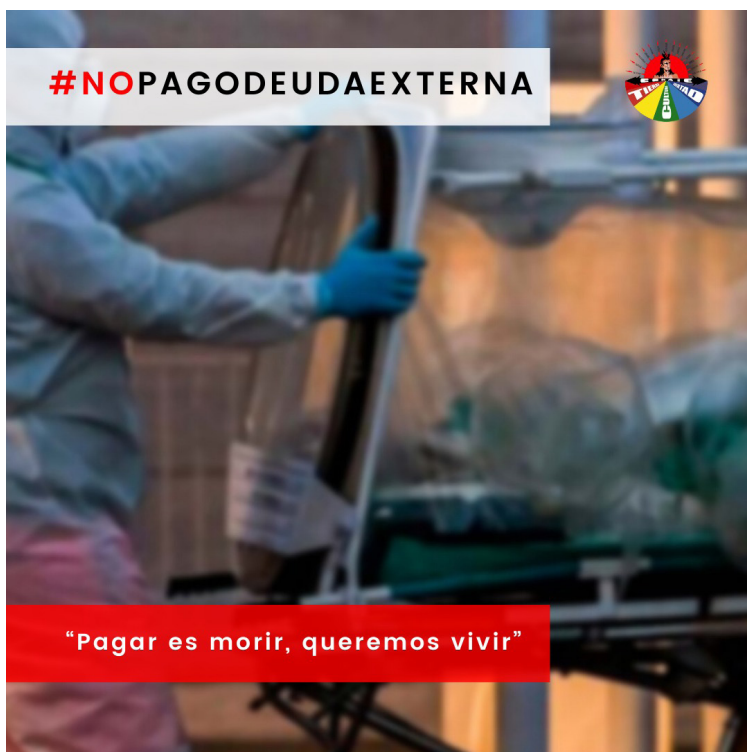
### 3 Debt Before Life

By the middle of March 2020 “community transmission” of COVID-19 had begun along with panic-buying and the first moves toward a national lockdown. The Minister of Health—who would soon resign in protest—clarified that only 3,000 COVID-19 tests were available, as healthcare workers protested the scarcity of basic protective gear, including masks.

Meanwhile, a competing public obligation loomed: \$324 million dollars in bonds falling due on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March. In the days leading up to the payment, entities ranging from Ecuador’s legislative body, the National Assembly, to CONAIE prevailed on the government to postpone debt service and redirect money to pandemic preparation, pointing to the sharpening contradiction between life and debt. In an exceedingly rare show of unanimity, the National Assembly demanded that in “defense of the principles of solidarity, and the prioritization of health and human life” the government direct “all available cash resources” to “ensure the complete functioning of the national health system,” noting that “the protection and care for life should begin with those who are at the forefront of the national emergency”. They also urged the government to take “into account the urgent needs of our healthcare system and the priority that should be given to the life of Ecuadorians...[and] solicit from multilateral organizations the temporary suspension of the payment of external debt to the State’s creditors”, which should become a “crusade for life” with other Latin American and Caribbean states (Asamblea Nacional del Ecuador, 2020). CONAIE demanded that “the National Government SUSPEND the payment of external debt, since the priority is to direct these economic resources to meet the needs of the crisis of the public health care system brought on by COVID-19”. They went on to demand that resources be channeled into economic support for the “popular sectors, who are the most affected”, and the rehiring of the “approximately seven thousand functionaries of the healthcare system that have been unjustly laid off in the last three years” (CONAIE, 2020a).<sup>8</sup> International organizations such as the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt added their support, arguing that a suspension of debt payments would be justified under international law (CADTM, 2020).

Despite the breadth of opposition, the government paid the full \$324 million on time—liquidating seven tons of gold from Ecuador’s international reserves—while citing the need to maintain investors’ confidence. In the following months, as the pandemic raged, the government continued to dedicate scarce resources to debt service—approximately one billion dollars in all—while cautiously entering renegotiations with creditors under the tutelage of the IMF. Meanwhile, opposition to ongoing debt payments and the renegotiation process continued. A coalition of civil society groups led by Acción Jurídica Popular (Popular Juridical Action) brought an unsuccessful suit to the constitutional





**Figure 3:** Image circulated by CONAIE on social media on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March. The text reads: #IDon'tPayExternalDebt and “to pay is to die, we want to live”.

court, demanding suspension of payment until healthcare workers were adequately equipped. Former members of Ecuador's Commission to Audit the International Debt published an open letter denouncing the renegotiation as insufficient and unconstitutional (Toussaint et al., 2020). Pressure campaigns were organized, including “*cacerolazos*”, the pot-banging protests historically performed under curfew, and its online equivalent, the “*tweetazo*” (or *twitteadas*) which mobilizes Twitter users to raise the profile of a topic, phrase or demand (see figures 2, 3 and 4).

In accordance with its established role as a “gatekeeper” for foreign investment, the IMF's approval of a new “extended funds facility” (i.e., structural adjustment) loan was a condition for international banks' acceptance of a renegotiation of Ecuador's foreign debt. Civil society organizations in Ecuador and abroad therefore prevailed on the IMF to forego austerity and to push for more favorable terms with creditors. An open letter signed by CONAIE and trade union and student organizations (the United Workers' Front and the Popular Front) urged the IMF to suspend obligations, intervene with creditors, and provide non-reimbursable aid, declaring that “‘first life and then debt!’ is and will be our watchword” (Colectivo Nacional, 2020). An open letter by development scholars similarly pointed to the damage done by healthcare cuts and urged the IMF to abandon austerity (Corkery et al., 2020; see also Badillo Salgado & Fischer, 2020).

At the end of September, the IMF granted final approval for a \$6.5 billion loan tied to a program of adjustment to begin in 2021, clearing the way for the renegotiated schedule of payments on \$17 billion in bonds. This was represented by both the Moreno government and the IMF as an achievement providing time and resources to deal with the pandemic (IMF, 2020). Critics, including the economist and *correista* presidential candidate Andrés Arauz, argued variously that the agreement ceded too much to bondholders; failed to affirm the right to suspend debt payments in a public health emergency; and placed Ecuador once again under the tutelage of the IMF, still intent on the neoliberalization of finance and austerity in the medium term (Arauz, 2020; Toussaint et al., 2020). Most importantly, though, this limited debt relief came too late to provide the resources so acutely-needed in the pandemic's crucial early days: the first peak of the pandemic had occurred in May, bringing nearly 20,000 excess deaths (The Economist, 2020).

That the obligations to bondholders prevailed over the obligation to maintain life, even over the protests of such a broad array of actors—including the unanimous pronouncement by a legislative assembly controlled by the president's



Figure 4: Image circulated on WhatsApp to promote a Twitter campaign to urge the constitutional court to suspend debt payments. The text at the top reads: How much for health? We are more important than the foreign debt.

own party—provides a striking example of the power of finance capital. The operation of this power, or how exactly the obligation to bondholders was imposed on the state, remains a question for further research. In the terms of the classic Miliband-Poulantzas debate, many of the government's critics preferred the "institutional" explanation of direct influence of capital on the state (see Fairfield, 2015)—which is also the most "scandalous" interpretation, insofar as it puts the onus on individual actors. Although the identities of the bondholders—and their relationship to the government—remain mostly unknown, Arauz and his circle suggested that members of the government may have direct financial interests in the debt (e.g., Arauz, 2020). Certainly, the Moreno administration has close relations with the financial sector, with bankers holding key positions in government, and there is substantial historical evidence of domestic financiers exerting direct influence on the Ecuadorian state (see e.g., Acosta, 2006). At the same time, this argument may underemphasize the breadth and diversity of forms of capitalist compulsion on the state, individualizing (and scandalizing) a systemically-produced outcome.

It is also important to note that, despite the diversity of voices opposed to the debt payments, the controversy was limited to a relatively small public of intellectuals and politicians. The *cacerolazos* went unnoticed—in contrast to the cacophony heard in Quito during the October 2019 protests—and Twitter's trending topics were dominated by pandemic news and corruption scandals, although #ExternalDebt and #lifebeforedebt did make some impact the day the 2020 Bonds came due. The absence of broad mobilization to demand protection of vulnerable lives and livelihoods would continue to characterize the political and moral economy of the pandemic.

## 4 Cardboard Coffins

The life over debt controversy was largely overshadowed by scandals over the fate of the dead and public corruption. The news was truly harrowing. Guayaquil's overwhelmed healthcare system was not only unable to attend to the sick, but was even incapable of recovering the bodies of those who died at home. Cadavers were left out in the streets for days. Those who did die in the hospital often disappeared: news reports profiled relatives sifting through piles of dead bodies or protesting to demand that the dead be returned to them. Vultures were photographed circling over the hospital, an apt if generally unremarked synecdoche of those feeding off the collapse of the public health system. Controversies erupted over mass graves and the shortage of coffins. Certainly, few things are more sensational than infected cadavers in the street. Catholicism and Day of the Dead rites also make for powerful obligations to bury remains in a marked place. Deaths in isolation created obstacles to grieving, even as many were forced to mourn multiple close relations. But

questions about the handling of bodies also became a focal point of critique of the pandemic response and, at times, an oblique way of addressing the class inequalities in its unfolding.

Cardboard coffins provided one such controversy: in early April, the association of cardboard manufacturers donated boxes ordinarily used for shipping to be used as coffins. A glowing article about the donations received a flood of overwhelmingly negative commentary on Twitter (El Universo, 2020a). The predominant tone is indignant and incredulous (“this has to be a joke”). While a few raised concerns about biosecurity, most refer to the “indignity” or “humiliation” of cardboard, or the inadequacy and cynicism of such barebones charity or “alms” (*limosnas*). A few days later, the prefect of Pichincha (where Quito is located), a leader in the *correista* opposition, promoted the province’s manufacture of wooden coffins “to ensure that persons of the impoverished sectors can provide a dignified burial” (Prefectura de Pichincha, 2020). A common denominator of critique was that cardboard coffins failed to meet obligations to the dignity of the dead. Defenders of the coffins challenged this narrative, pointing out that the donation was a purely voluntary act of “solidarity”, which could not be held to any obligatory standard—in fact, the obligation was turned around; “if you can do better, donate yourself”. Others asserted that in a pandemic, different standards apply; that poor people will be grateful; or, in the words of the head of the government’s Cadaver Recuperation Task Force, “a cardboard coffin is more dignified than throwing them into a bag or burying them without a bag or anything” (Medina & Mendoza, 2020). This latter statement is a particularly stark example of the symbolic violence implied by the refusal to recognize the dignity of the dead, with its language of “throwing” bodies and reference to “bags or nothing”, terms much closer to the discourse of waste management than that of funerary arrangements.

A clear preponderance of online opinion considered “better than a bag or nothing” as an inadequate standard for the handling of their compatriots’ cadavers. Few, however, presented cardboard coffins as a consequence of the failure to meet a prior obligation to the living, although there were exceptions: a widely shared post by a leftist Facebook group read grimly, “NEOLIBERAL [skull emoji] 250 million for the army, 50 for Robocops, 324 for external debt. And Ecuadorians? Common grave and cardboard coffins [skull emoji]” (Crudo Cuántico, 2020; see also Mantilla Rinvik, 2020). Here dignified burial seems the last and most minimal of demands, after the healthcare system failed to save the lives entrusted to it, but the bondholders received their payments on time.

The politicization of the pandemic response was however dominated by the scandalization of corruption. Throughout the first months of the pandemic a steady stream of revelations implicated authorities within the public hospitals of working with contractors to over-charge for medical supplies. If the amounts concerned were relatively small, the act of profiteering from the pandemic sparked particularly intense indignation. Moreover, evidence suggested coordination at a high level through a network of associates of Dalo Bucarám, son of a notoriously corrupt former president. A leaked recording of legislators seemed to implicate the powerful and controversial Minister of the Interior, María Paula Romo, as well, in a scheme to distribute access to privileged positions in the public health system as part of a network of organized graft. Critics began to talk about the “dividing up” (*reparto*) of the hospitals (see fig. 5).

Corruption was already a predominant theme of public discourse. Moreno’s government had, ironically, defined itself principally through the anticorruption crusade it waged against his predecessor, Correa. This crusade was itself bound up with the push for public retrenchment and tax cuts; if it was corruption that made the state “obese”, then the state could be slimmed down at no cost to honest people. Although this narrative depended on exaggerating the fiscal impact of corruption, it was easily assimilated by the public, overshadowing demonstrable improvements in healthcare, especially among middle classes who rely on private services and who have a longstanding disposition to anti-corruption politics (Muir & Gupta, 2018, p. S11). The spread of scandal to the Moreno government only confirmed the perception of pervasive corruption, undermining its attempt to reverse course and increase taxes in order to fund an expanded pandemic response, as explained in the following section.

## 5 Distributing the Burden

As the economic consequences of the pandemic became clearer, new questions emerged: Should banks continue to collect on debts. And what about rent and utility payments? Should businesses be permitted to lay off employees? Such questions were addressed through executive decrees mainly affecting contractual obligations: debts, utilities and rent, employment, and private education. Public controversy over these measures was limited at first, although



debate heated up when they were reformulated, codified and combined with a one-time tax in the “Organic Law of Humanitarian Support”, or “Humanitarian Law” for short, which sought to establish an integrated response to the pandemic, combining limited support for individuals and businesses, partial suspension of private debt obligations, and labor flexibilization. Controversy also emerged around deepening austerity and the announcement of massive cuts to higher education, as well as the privatization or closure of public entities from preschools to postal service to trains.

Measures such as the prohibition on layoffs, deferment of interest payments and the suspension of utility cut-offs and evictions somewhat contained the devastation of popular livelihoods. At the same time, they did much more to protect those in the middle classes or above, who are more likely to have formal sector jobs and bank credit. The more than half of the workforce without formal contracts received little protection, at the same time as informal activities were particularly hard-hit by the lockdown. The lowest-income and most precarious workers therefore bore the brunt of the burden of pandemic containment. The burden was also highly gendered. The closure of schools—beginning in March and still ongoing as of November—added to childcare obligations, which, given the distribution of household labor, fell disproportionately on women, with broad ramifications for gender inequalities (Velasco Abad & Hurtado Caicedo, 2020). There was little public consideration of a corresponding social obligation to compensate those obliged to assume a greater burden of social reproductive labor, or those who were unable to work because of pandemic restrictions imposed in the interests of society as a whole—although CONAIE and its allies did point towards this argument in some of its pronouncements, as in the letter to the IMF, where they invoked the need for public resources to provide “compensatory income” to the “poorest sectors” who had been most adversely affected by the lockdown (Colectivo Nacional, 2020).<sup>9</sup>

Middle and upper-income groups were much more capable of defending their collective interests, in part through the greater weight of their concerns in public culture. The fate of the taxes proposed in the “Humanitarian Law” is indicative. Given sky-high interest rates on Ecuador's public debt and the limits of dollarization, taxes were the most feasible means to acquire resources to confront the pandemic. To that end, the Humanitarian Law established a one-time contribution: businesses with more than a million dollars in profits would pay 5% of their income, while individuals would contribute along a sliding scale, from \$18 for those making \$500 per month to \$595,000 for those with monthly incomes of \$250,000 or more.<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that the \$500 per month salary at which the contributions begin is slightly above the national average salary of \$466.

Core features of the law appealed to the logic of austerity and deligitimation of the public sector. Public employees were taxed at a higher rate. The money collected would go to a “special account for humanitarian assistance”, a quasi-private entity overseen by appointees from “civil society”. As the Minister of Finance, Richard Martínez, emphasized, “the money will not go to the State. It will be used for humanitarian kits, food, covering school tuition for low-income persons, and to help small businesses” (Tapia, 2020).<sup>11</sup>

Humanitarianism as a term is itself associated with voluntary assistance to save humans from peril, rather than with distributive justice. Moreno's speech announcing the law similarly emphasized “help” for “the weakest”:

[The Humanitarian Law's] spirit is to motivate solidarity. That he who has more, support he has less, that the most solid enterprises support the weakest. With these contributions we will also be able to help more than two million families with a grant of \$60 per month. These are families that depend on the day to day, who don't have a fixed income. I am referring to the street vendor, the tire repairman, the hairdresser, the gardener, the baker... We will always be on the side of the weakest. Ecuadorian: tell me with your hand on your heart, how would you feel if you didn't contribute anything in this moment? (Moreno Garcés, 2020)

The decision to cut the president's and ministers' salaries in half was explained in similarly voluntarist terms; “the example begins at home”.

Opponents from the Right turned this discourse of solidarity and help against fiscal obligation. Jaime Nebot, the influential former mayor of Guayaquil, stated that “you can't have solidarity being imposed by law” (Imbaquingo, 2020). The spokesman for the Guayaquil Chamber of Commerce argued that “removing liquidity from the productive sector ... strikes at solidarity” (El Universo, 2020b). The online publication Plan V covered a forum of the Esquel Foundation, where business “experts” advocated expanding the “social and solidarity economy” while emphasizing that “we can't let the State get used to collecting taxes every time there is a problem” (Plan V, 2020a).

Appeal to the voluntary nature of solidarity was complemented by objections to taxation on the grounds of economic efficiency.<sup>12</sup> Right-wing politicians and the established media treat as common sense the idea that taxes “suffocate” economic growth by taking resources away from those who “create jobs”, an argument that was constantly

reiterated in discussion of the law. The elementary macroeconomic argument that transfers to those in need—even when tax-financed—stimulates a depressed economy was almost entirely unheard, revealing the degree to which anti-tax moneyed interests dominated the terms of public debate.<sup>13</sup>

Others objected to the distribution of tax obligations. Labor representatives argued for raising the floor for contributions to those making either \$714, \$800 or \$1000 a month (Enríquez, 2020). CONAIE was more emphatic, tweeting “measures announced by @Lenin reveal a government unable to guarantee social and economic welfare to the people, *another robbery of the pockets of thousands of workers and their families* added to unstable employment and the non-payment of wages. The sacking of public funds is already another ‘pandemic’” (CONAIE, 2020b, emphasis mine). Their position, shared by many on the Left, was that resources should be raised exclusively from the wealthy and big business. However, given the scale of contributions, which only began at incomes above the average, this position also amounted to a defense of the middle and upper-middle classes—who, in fact, provide the bulk of left intellectuals.

Torn between these competing positions, the National Assembly succumbed to anti-tax opposition and left the special contribution out entirely, leading the coordinator of the governing bloc to condemn this show of “avarice”, although Moreno himself claimed that he had listened to constituents and was protecting businesses and jobs (Velez, 2020).<sup>14</sup> Humanitarian assistance was therefore stripped from the final version of the “Humanitarian Law”, leaving a statute whose most significant impact was the flexibilization of labor contracts, weakening one of the main sources of social protection without providing an alternative. Other measures governing rent, utility and interest payments on debts, health insurance, and the like had already been established by decree, and expired shortly after the end of the state of exception in August, in contrast to the labor flexibilization, which was set to last for years.

As the Humanitarian Law was being debated, public cutbacks led to layoffs, reduced salaries paid months behind schedule, and privatization. Public-sector workers demonstrated against these measures, although only the massive cuts to higher education were to a degree successfully resisted.

While middle classes had at least some power to defend causes and institutions dear to them, the poor were left with little more than charity. The *bono*, a targeted anti-poverty subsidy was expanded to a few hundreds of thousands more persons. Not only was its reach limited, but the \$60 a month provided was at best a livelihood supplement.<sup>15</sup> Food kits, distributed by the millions by public and private agencies, became a key part of the pandemic response, helping those unable work to avoid starvation, albeit not penury. Distributive justice aside, an expansive “temporary basic income” has been promoted by agencies such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) as a way to make social distancing viable and contain poverty (Gray Molina & Ortiz-Juarez, 2020). There was however little public consideration, much less agitation for, such a policy.<sup>16</sup> A representative of the UNDP who raised the idea with the mayor of Quito on a radio show at the end of May was rebuffed, the mayor emphasizing the need to “re-open safely” instead. In the absence of income support, poverty, inequality, and recourse to loan sharks increased, expanding a web of obligations with ominous implications.

## 6 Sidewalk Politics

Obligations in the pandemic were also negotiated through controversies and scandals over the comportment of bodies in the street. In this section I will examine several of these controversies, underlining how their deployment through public culture ultimately served to reinforce existing hierarchies of race, class, and gender, while also highlighting the importance of the specter of protest, or massively (as opposed to individually) undisciplined subaltern bodies.

### 6.1 The Scandal of Lady Sidewalk

The first case concerns a scandal that emerged at the outset as a kind of denunciation of class inequalities and the forms of behavior emergent from them. For a few days in April, a scandal erupted in Twitter over the attempts by a young man, “Jorge”, to expel volunteer workers from “his” sidewalk.<sup>17</sup> As the volunteers, who were distributing food kits to Jorge’s neighbors, calmly insisted on their rights to this public space, Jorge became increasingly agitated and his arguments increasingly bizarre, a process culminating with his call to the police. As a video of the incident recorded by

the volunteers went viral, the discussion spread from social media to the news and back, and Jorge, redubbed “Lady Sidewalk” (Lady Vereda), was subject to a storm of condemnation, a scandal that is particularly revealing for the ways that it articulated representations of class, gender, and obligation.

For some, Lady Sidewalk became the standard-bearer of “class privilege”, an association bolstered by his status as a law student at an elite private university. As one Twitter user put it: “#LadySidewalk is summarized this way: class privilege above what it means to be empathetic and to live in community in the midst of a crisis and beyond. GARBAGE.” Here Jorge is taken as representative of a class habitus characterized by a failure of “empathy” and commitment to community, a problem that is especially notable during the pandemic but also transcends it. In this vein, the scandal over #LadyVereda became a vehicle for a critique of class inequalities, but one that focused on the lack of solidarity of the privileged.

But why was this apparently cis male referred to as *lady* sidewalk?<sup>18</sup> Some commentators noted that this sobriquet employed femininity as a term of disparagement, contributing thereby to patriarchal devaluation. Certainly, one aim was to deprive him of phallic value; a series of tweets from a purported ex testified in detail to his sexual incompetence and diminutive phallus. But the emphasis on femininity—and presumably the reason that Lady Sidewalk caught on as if it were an inspired moniker—is also due to a more specific gendered representation that has historically been used to characterize Latin American elites as petty, selfish and ineffectual in contrast to a supposedly public-spirited, team-oriented and “democratic” middle-class masculinity (López-Pedrerros, 2019).<sup>19</sup> Lady Vereda’s fit of pique seemed to embody a kind of feminized pettiness that much of Ecuadorian Twitter’s middle class public defines itself against. This was a severely limited critique of class inequality, affirming a construct of class that made inequality essentially a problem of gendered moral character. And insofar as the problem is presented as a particularly “bitchy” interference with the voluntary distribution of charity, inequalities that make some dependent on the good will of others go unquestioned.

No one defended Lady Sidewalk, and the obligation to allow the voluntary distribution of food in public thoroughfares was affirmed. But there were also vigorous attempts to ensure that the discussion went no further, to limit the reputational damage to the privileged and tamp down the flames of “class war”. Some suggested that Lady Sidewalk is not really a member of the upper classes. As one highly-liked tweet put it: “Why give so much importance to someone insignificant [facepalm emoji] gross *this dramatic girl* [lipstick emoji, bowtie emoji] *doesn't even have money*. It's just appearances and false pretension” (emphasis mine). Some circulated a post by Jorge supporting Correa, to suggest that he was in fact representative of the former presidents’ (often proletarian and left-leaning) supporters—charges countered in turn by more recent photographs of Jorge posing with the banker and right-wing politician, Guillermo Lasso.

Others suggested that his behavior could only be assessed as an individual matter, had nothing to do with class, and that, lamentable as his actions were, the *real* problem were those who sought to stir up “class warfare”. A young woman’s widely-liked tweet said: “Broooother don’t screw with me. I’m from the USFQ, too, and I’m not a cretin. In my house they taught me to have solidarity with those who need it. #LadySidewalk’s habits come from the cradle. Making this about “class struggle” is just as stupid as the lack of empathy of this dumb kid [*guachín*]”. The dean of the law school where Jorge studied similarly tweeted that “the accumulated social resentment and generalization is as shameful as the prepotency and ignorance demonstrated by this young man”. An opinion piece in the newspaper *El Comercio* disparaged the idea, allegedly spread by those who want to foment “class war”, that the case represents any real moral differences between the classes. Characterizing the behavior of Lady Sidewalk as a purely individual matter, while classifying both social resentment and “class struggle” as “stupid” and “shameful”, these comments move seamlessly from an apparent repudiation of Jorge’s actions to the disparagement of challenges to class hierarchy, all the while professing allegiance to the same terms of “solidarity” and “empathy” used by critics of inequality.

## 6.2 Disciplining the Street

Despite the repudiation of “Lady Sidewalk”, the scandal also points towards broader patterns of exclusion in public spaces. Police and military, as well as the media, have often taken a punitive and exclusionary approach to subalterns in public space, which was amplified during the pandemic as anxiety about the “indiscipline” of the disorderly multitude



**Figure 5:** Lady Sidewalk repurposed as #LadyDistribution, “hospitals delivered to your home,” a commentary on corruption scandals. The face is that of the Minister of Interior. Anonymous meme.

extended from coronavirus contagion to the fear of a “social explosion”. The inability of the social order to maintain lives and livelihoods encouraged a punitive approach to the pandemic.

On the one hand, the Ecuadorian state, at various levels, mobilized relatively quickly and decisively to limit the spread of the virus through a strict lockdown. The social costs of these measures, however, fell particularly heavily on the vast numbers of informal sector workers, from street vendors to domestics, unprotected by the formal obligations of employers to maintain payroll, and reliant on the ability to transit through or work in public spaces: for them, to “stay home” (*quédate en casa*), as the public campaign put it, meant to forego livelihood. But instead of a public recognition of this sacrifice, public discourse focused on the problem of “indiscipline” in public space.

During the outbreak in Guayaquil, representations of the people of the coastal region as disorderly circulated through social media alongside reports by human rights organizations of punitive tactics in the enforcement of social isolation. According to one report, a mother who went out after the 2pm curfew to solicit food from her neighbors with which to feed her family was taken by the police, who allegedly forced her to consume the donated food raw. Video circulated of the police cutting the hair of a young, Black man found in the street and forcing him to do push-ups (see fig. 6).

In Quito, public concern about “indiscipline” focused on markets and street vendors. Andean authorities have long been particularly preoccupied with both, for hygienic reasons as well as anxieties of race, class and gender (Kingman Garcés, 2006; Weismantel, 2001). COVID-19, in contrast to cholera, is, however, most easily spread by air in confined spaces, making malls, restaurants, offices, and factories—as well as indoor markets—much riskier than vending outdoors.<sup>20</sup> Although this was not clear at the outset of the pandemic, the contrary assumption—that street vending is *particularly* dangerous—had an inordinate influence. Even as enclosed commercial spaces like restaurants were reopened, the fixation on the dangers of street vendors and disorder in public space continued. *El Comercio* regularly carried reports of “indiscipline” in the streets of Quito which invariably assessed the commitment or negligence of the police in controlling street vendors. As late as mid-August, a police truck passed below my apartment in Quito’s historic center. A recorded message blared a reminder of the 7pm curfew while also cautioning the public to “avoid buying in public” because the items “could be contaminated”.

The impulse to impose order on the street was bolstered by a more general concept that the severity of the pandemic in Ecuador was due to “indiscipline”, which itself draws on tropes of delayed modernity. Eduardo, a dairy farmer





Figure 6: Contrasting enforcement of curfew for “the people” and “the bourgeoisie”. Anonymous meme.

employed by a *hacienda* near Quito, was indignant that the government would fail to pay doctors during a pandemic. But he also framed the challenge of COVID-19 in terms of Ecuadorians’ inability to follow guidelines: “if it was bad in Italy, Spain, the United States, places where people really do respect the rules (*hacen caso*), imagine here!”. My own observations indicated, on the contrary, that the guidelines and rules were widely respected in comparison to the United States.<sup>21</sup>

There was also a more political aspect to the control of public space, even if this is difficult to distinguish from the public health rationale. The “state of exception” which lasted for approximately half a year before it was ended by the constitutional court, allowed for the suspension of rights of movement and assembly, providing tools for the control of protests as well as contagion. In fact, this was the second state of exception in less than a year, the first having been used to repress the protests of October 2019. Other measures put into place during the pandemic targeted protests specifically. A decree was issued to augment the military’s ability to employ the “progressive use of force” to confront protestors. The military also requested permission to station soldiers at the Pontifical Catholic University, which had served as a refuge for protestors during the tear-gas bombardments in October. This suggests just how much the specter of a return to road blockades and demonstrations haunted elites during the pandemic, encouraged by occasional threats by CONAIE (e.g., *El Universo*, 2020c). The “democratic” online periodical Plan V gave extensive coverage to a report presented to Moreno and his Council of Public Security, stressing the possibility of “social disintegration” and “destabilization” by “antagonistic groups and social and Indigenous organizations”. The deterioration of the material and even psychological conditions of the popular classes is presented here as a security risk and threat to public order (Plan V, 2020b).

There was, however, no return to mass protests or road blockades, despite the steadily worsening economic, working and living conditions, and the deepening of austerity—although there was a steady stream of smaller protests by delivery drivers, gym owners, relatives of the deceased, public sector workers and students, debtors, and others. It is possible, however, that the threat of “social disintegration” and “destabilization” prevented even more brutal adjustments. With subaltern perspectives and interests largely excluded from public culture, the threat of economically and politically costly protests was employed as a counterweight. On this point, a letter sent by the Pueblo Negro (Black People) to Cynthia Viteri, the mayor of Guayaquil at the end of April is instructive. It points to the possibility of a “social explosion” if conditions remain as they are, while presenting a (modest) set of demands for participation in the distribution of food boxes and relief from utility payments (Leones & Cangá, 2020). Although it is a document circulated beyond its stated audience, in tone and substance it is a letter appealing directly to Viteri—after all, what kind of reception might the Pueblo Negro expect to find in the Ecuadorian public? The negative sanction of threatened disorder is, however, a limited tool, more easily applied to modest ends and defensive struggles than to the creation of the kind of policies that might have provided an effective response to the pandemic.

## 7 Conclusion: Beyond Scandalous

Historically, some kinds of catastrophic events, such as total wars and pandemics, have stimulated the reorganization of social obligations, sometimes in ways that promoted more egalitarian social orders. But while the life-and-death context of the COVID-19 pandemic amplified criticism of some forms of obligation—especially the privileging of international debt—the challenge to Ecuador’s highly unequal structure of obligations has been constrained, and the burden of the crisis has fallen disproportionately on those with the least resources to confront it.

This paper has addressed the reproduction of asymmetrical obligations through the controversies and scandals that occupied Ecuador’s public culture during the first months of the pandemic. As outrage swirled around a set of scandals, including public corruption, the disposal of cadavers, and the conduct of bodies in the street, little attention was given to how the burden of the pandemic was distributed by class, race and ethnicity, and gender—while the framing of the scandals themselves generally served to reinforce or affirm, rather than challenge, those inequalities. The controversies that did erupt over more systemic issues, including the distribution of debt and fiscal obligations, were resolved in ways that preserved and bolstered the lopsided accumulation of wealth, both nationally and globally. Against entrenched inequalities, the Ecuadorian “civil sphere” was unable to advance the most essential popular interests in the face of a generalized threat to life (cf., Alexander & Tognato, 2018). Rather, power and privilege constrained the renegotiation of social obligations, to the detriment of health and of livelihood. Although that may change tomorrow, nothing will recover the tens of thousands of lives already lost.

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## Notes

- 1 The measure employed is deaths in excess of those in a normal year. It is the most comprehensive measure of the pandemic's impact on mortality, particularly because of limited testing, but also because collapse of the healthcare system leads to deaths by other causes. Ecuador was second only to Peru in this measure during this period. Data provided by *The Economist* (2020).
- 2 Ecuador was hit particularly hard by the decline in the price of petroleum, from \$61 in January to \$18.35 in April.
- 3 The searchable database of Twitter trending topics is available at: [www.trendogate.com](http://www.trendogate.com).
- 4 Gramsci defines the intellectual in terms of the social function of providing intellectual and moral leadership, always tied to a class position.
- 5 Scandal as a category has received surprisingly little attention in anthropology, especially recently. A review of articles in Anthrosource found only three articles with scandal as a keyword, and five with this term in the title. Turner's idea of the "social drama" is useful but presumes that a meaningful crisis ensues for all concerned, which is not necessarily the case, particularly in situations of impunity for the powerful.
- 6 As Peebles points out (2010), debt is closely linked to bodies, both individual and national.
- 7 This means that the morality of public debt is widely questioned, as it is in other Latin American polities (see e.g., Goddard, 2018).
- 8 The communique also calls for increased cooperation with Cuba, China and Russia. If aid from these countries has also been controversial, they are seen as an alternative to the Washington-centered, neoliberalizing system of international credit.
- 9 Salvadoran President Bukele's \$1,000 subsidy was influential at this time, as were his public statements critiquing Ecuador's pandemic response.
- 10 Additional numbers from the scale to give a fuller picture: those earning from \$850 to \$4500 a month, would pay between \$100 and \$2800.
- 11 The promise to use the fund to cover (private) school tuition is another telling example of deligitimation of the public sector.
- 12 Some who opposed taxation of businesses on economic grounds, such as the banker and presidential candidate Guillermo Lasso, were, however, publicly willing to countenance taxes on very high-income individuals.
- 13 That tax-funded transfers or public spending stimulate a depressed economy is elementary macroeconomics: every penny transferred to the poor and most of what is spent by the state goes directly to increasing demand. On the other hand, some of what is untaxed goes to savings—and especially so when there is a deficit of demand.
- 14 An (unsuccessful) last minute proposal to make contributions voluntary is also indicative of the state of the debate.
- 15 The *bonos* were distributed in person at a few banks, producing long lines and crowds at the peak of the pandemic. Critics observed that the disarticulation of the digital money program at the behest of the finance industry contributed to this problem.
- 16 CONAIE emphasized food kits using the products of peasant agriculture more than monetary transfers.
- 17 Although his real name is a matter of public record, I prefer to provide a pseudonym here.
- 18 This is by no means meant to imply that gender identity can or should be imputed onto another, it is simply a recognition that society does indeed do so.
- 19 "In this case 'lady' is used in reference to the feminine as a form of insult or disparagement; in addition, in this case, they sought to highlight what many consider a compartment removed from the dominant idea of masculinity" (Simon, 2020).
- 20 One of the earliest "super spreading" events was an elite wedding in Samborondón, near Guayaquil.
- 21 There were documented cases of persons ignoring stay at home orders after diagnosis, shared by Moreno in his broadcasts, and converted into deeply tragic public health advertisements produced by the Municipality of Quito. For many, to "stay at home" was hardly an option, a fact which also contributed to widely-circulated scenes of crowded transportation. Masks are, however, universal, many people practice social distancing, and I have seen much less evidence of virus denialism than in reports from the United States. Surveys confirm both the widespread fear of contagion and the tendency to blame undisciplined behavior for the viruses spread (CEDATOS, 2020).