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SOCIETY

Covid-19: We're Struggling With the Coronavirus in Spain—but We're Vastly More Prepared Than the US

Sunday 22 March 2020, by [EHRENREICH Ben](#) (Date first published: 19 March 2020).

I am locked down in Barcelona, but at least there is universal health care and a tradition of mutual support.

On the first Friday in March, I flew to the United States for an overdue family visit. I've lived in Spain for more than a year now and hadn't been able to travel since the fall, when my partner was six months pregnant. A few weeks after our daughter's birth in January, and two days after the World Health Organization gave the illness caused by the new coronavirus its appropriately sci-fi name, I booked a ticket home.

When I landed at JFK, Donald Trump was still promising that Covid-19 would simply go away without any effort on the part of the government. "It's like a miracle," he promised. "It will disappear." At that point the virus had killed more than 3,000 people and was migrating quickly around the globe. It had just appeared in Colombia and Peru, South Africa and Cameroon. It was in Australia and New Zealand and, thanks to an American tourist, had reached the mountains of Bhutan.

The virus was also in Europe. The day I arrived in the United States, there were nearly 150 cases in Spain and already nearly 4,000 nearby in Italy. You wouldn't have known that, though, from the immigration officer who flipped through my passport a few times and asked me, twice, if I'd been to Iran or China. As I left, the airport was spookily empty, save for a few workers standing here and there, their eyes darting anxiously above their face masks—just the surgical ones, not the kind that actually protects you from contagion.

It didn't occur to me at the time, but Kennedy airport was the US in microcosm that eerie afternoon: a nervous, lonely, precariously employed population shifting its weight from foot to foot, no one knowing what to do or how to protect themselves, while their leaders continued to focus on manufactured fears, the authorities absent except for the usual bloated and racist apparatus of exclusion, all its expensive infrastructure useless for such basic goals as survival.

Perhaps more unnervingly, the country still felt calm enough. The NBA was still playing, and the schools were open, bars and restaurants too. The toilet paper frenzy [[1](#)] had not yet begun. People were still shaking hands. But the buzz of doom was whining at a higher pitch than usual. You couldn't miss it. Every day, the global death count ticked a little higher. In the United States, fatalities were still low. So was the official number of cases. If you were paying attention, you knew this was not a cause for comfort: Without tests, no one knew how bad it was. And if they didn't know, they couldn't begin to respond.

In Spain, they knew. From that Sunday to Monday the number of cases doubled overnight. Community transmission had been confirmed in Madrid and in the Basque country. I called home and learned that Sergio, our upstairs neighbor in Barcelona, had come down with a cough that wouldn't go away. He worked in a restaurant, so the doctors at the public clinic at the bottom of our street told him to come in for a test. In the end, they didn't give him one—his symptoms were mild, and the health authorities were already rationing tests. (They have since restocked. [2]) They told him to stay home, and that they would call to check in on him. Without charge, of course. You don't have to pay for medical care here.

By March 9, I was beginning to worry that I wouldn't be able to get home. All of Italy had been locked down and Spain didn't seem far behind. Madrid's public schools had already been closed. Every quick FaceTime with my daughter, who in my absence had learned to coo, made me more concerned. If I got sick, I wouldn't be able to travel and it might be months before things returned to normal, if they ever do. I tried to change my ticket, but the airline wanted the usual exorbitant fees.

I left the United States on the night of March 11, not knowing when I would be able to return, or what the country will look like when I do. I was sitting at the gate in another empty airport, waiting to board, when I read that Trump had finally acted—not by expanding health coverage or mandating paid sick leave, but by closing the borders to the “foreign virus,” [3] and to Europeans—except the English ones, who could still come.

Spain is hardly a utopia. Despite its name, the Socialist Workers Party, now in power, has historically proved comfortable with neoliberal austerity measures when not pressured hard from the left. Twelve years after the last crisis, unemployment is at nearly 14 percent, and at over 30 percent for the young. The rising cost of housing has pushed two of my friends out of Barcelona since this year began—and I don't have many friends here yet. But as strapped as people are and as precarious as things have become, affordable public education and universal health care are nonetheless a given, if a hard-fought one, as are powerfully rooted collective traditions: not just mass strikes and protests but also varieties of mutual support that have been under methodical assault in the United States for more than half a century. When I attempt to explain to friends such fundamentals of American existence as insulin at \$300 a vial [4], routine homeless sweeps, and school-lunch debt, they look at me blankly, as if I'm making shit up.

The day I returned, four towns just outside of Barcelona were sealed off [5]. Two government ministers had just tested positive for Covid-19, as had half a dozen elected politicians from the far-right party Vox, including its pistol-toting leader, Santiago Abascal. (Department of Small Blessings: So far, the virus seems to prefer neo-fascist hosts.) It should have been rush hour, but traffic was sparse, and the taxi driver who took me home complained that he had been waiting three and a half hours for a fare. The Chinese, he confided, had created the virus to wage economic warfare against Trump, and European governments were playing along, happy to renew their populations by shedding excess elderly. But, he advised, if you ate enough lemons and washed your hands, you should be fine. I didn't argue. Cuídate, I told him, and went upstairs to hug my kid.

I didn't get nervous until the next day, Friday, when I went out for groceries and found the streets abandoned and the supermarkets crowded, anxiety humming through the empty spaces on the shelves. I lugged home bags packed with rice and beans, pasta, oil, soap, just in time for the prime minister to declare a state of emergency. Its extraordinary terms—the closure of all nonessential businesses and the confinement of Spain's 47 million residents to their homes, except when buying groceries or other necessities, caring for dependents, going to the doctor, or, if necessary, traveling to and from work—would not be revealed in full until Saturday night, but by then most people were already voluntarily staying in.

Confirmed cases had jumped nearly tenfold in less than a week, to more than 6,000. (They have since more than doubled again.) A city that treasures its public life—where the plazas and the outdoor tables of the bars and cafés stay full even on the coldest winter days—had, under microbial siege, turned inward. Traffic went silent. With the windows open we could hear the wind, the birds singing in the trees, dogs barking blocks away.

Under any other circumstances—political unrest, another bombing [6]—the emergency order would have been terrifying. Under these ones, it is nonetheless alarming. I’ve read my Agamben [7] and know from bitter post-September 11 experience that “states of exception” become permanent realities. In Spain, local police have been placed under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior and charged with enforcing the lockdown, issuing 100-euro fines to anyone who cannot justify their presence out of doors. I have rarely seen police here stopping anyone who is not Arab, African, or Roma, and see little reason to believe that will change now. And what of the homeless, who have nowhere to go? And what of sex workers, what of addicts, what of the millions with no savings and now no money coming in? What will be left when we are free to walk the streets again?

Whatever happens, there is at least a sense that the government is and has been taking decisive and reasonably well-coordinated action, with the health of the population in mind, not just the profits of a few. On Monday, Pedro Sánchez’s government announced [8] that all private hospitals would be required to put their resources at the disposal of the national health system, and that all private enterprises possessing or capable of producing goods that might be useful in the fight against the virus—from masks and gloves and drugs to diagnostic equipment—had to report their holdings to the authorities. As an American, I still find the very concept of a government putting public good before private profit so unfamiliar as to be almost dizzying.

Sánchez has since pushed a nearly empty Congress of Deputies [9] to pass a €200 billion package [10] that will include guarantees that all workers have the right to stay home to care for their children or dependents and that no one will have their utilities shut off while the epidemic rages; a moratorium on mortgage payments for those who need it; expanded unemployment payments and social services for the elderly; and direct financial assistance for individual workers and freelancers as well as businesses. Barcelona’s mayor, Ada Colau, has pressed for a moratorium on rent [11] and a freeze on evictions as well [12].

Since the announcement of the lockdown here, I’ve received a stream of sympathetic texts and messages from friends back home. I don’t want to tell them that it’s them, and you—all of you, from DC to LA, and everywhere in between—that I’m most frightened for. Because your government, which is still my government too, has left you on your own, and left my parents, who are old, and my siblings, my nieces, all my friends, their kids, their parents, almost everyone I love. How do we begin to fight together when it’s not safe to gather in one place?

On Saturday at 10 pm, just after Sánchez addressed the nation to explain the terms of the emergency order, we heard a rumbling outside the windows. People all over the city—and, from what I understand, in Madrid too, and Valencia, and all over the country—were taking to their balconies and leaning out their windows to clap, all at once, for the health care workers, truck drivers, trash collectors, supermarket and warehouse workers, everyone out there laboring to keep the city alive while we hunkered safely inside [13]. We huddled on our narrow balcony and clapped along with our neighbors.

Monica, who lives next door and sells produce out of a stall in the market, cooed at the baby from her balcony, and Sarah, Sergio’s partner, who is 38 weeks pregnant, poked her head over from above to say she’d drop by in the morning. The applause—and it happened again the next night, and the next, and every night since—was a show of gratitude, to be sure, but it was also a way of telling

one another that we're still here, alive and, for now, unbeaten. It was only a gesture, but one that displayed much of what we'll need, in this country and in every other one, to get through this epidemic: solidarity, collective strength, care, and unbending, stubborn joy.

Ben Ehrenreich

P.S.

- THE NATION. MARCH 19, 2020:

<https://www.thenation.com/article/world/coronavirus-south-korea-america/>

Ben Ehrenreich's most recent book, *The Way to the Spring*, is based on his reporting from the West Bank. His next book, *Desert Notebooks: A Road Map for the End of Time*, will be published in July by Counterpoint Press.

- EDITOR'S NOTE: The Nation believes that helping readers stay informed about the impact of the coronavirus crisis is a form of public service. For that reason, this article, and all of our coronavirus coverage, is now free. Please subscribe to support our writers and staff, and stay healthy:

<https://subscribe.thenation.com/flex/NA/key/G0C1CNP/>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.sbs.com.au/language/english/wash-not-wipe-indians-respond-to-toilet-paper-hoarders-with-their-very-own-jet-spray-technique>

[2] <https://elpais.com/sociedad/2020-03-18/el-numero-de-personas-contagiadas-por-coronavirus-crece-hasta-las-13716-un-18-mas-que-hace-un-dia.html>

[3] <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/11/politics/coronavirus-trump-foreign-virus/index.html>

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/sep/23/diabetes-americans-soaring-insulin-prices>

[5] <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/spain-catalonia-puts-towns-coronavirus-quarantine-200313081333049.html>

[6] <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/11/04/world/europe/spain-train-bombings-fast-facts/index.html>

[7] <https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/S/bo3534874.html>

[8] <https://elpais.com/espana/2020-03-15/el-gobierno-pone-los-hospitales-privados-a-las-ordenes-de-las-comunidades.html>

[9] <https://elpais.com/espana/2020-03-17/sanchez-busca-el-apoyo-masivo-al-decreto-en-un-pleno-casi-vacio-del-congreso.html>

[10] <https://elpais.com/economia/2020-03-17/estas-son-todas-las-medidas-aprobadas-por-el-gobierno-para-combatir-la-crisis-del-coronavirus.html>

[11] https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/sociedad/Ada-Colau-Gobierno-alquileres-coronavirus_0_1006850319.html

[12] <https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/barcelona/20200313/474112347717/coronavirus-barcelona-suspenden-desahucios.html>

[13] <https://www.europapress.es/sociedad/noticia-cuarto-dia-consecutivo-aplausos-vitores-apoyo-profesionales-trabajan-contr-pandemia-20200317200731.html>