

2009 Mexico Swine Flu – 2020 Italy Covid19: How I Experienced A Double Quarantine

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In this article, I will briefly describe my experiences during the two pandemics, swine flu and COVID-19, when I accidentally lived through quarantine in the most affected countries: Mexico in 2009 and Rome, Italy.

When in 2008 I decided to go to Mexico to undertake fieldwork for my doctoral thesis, I could never have imagined that in 2009, I would experience my first quarantine, but above all, never in my life would I have imagined I'd be living a second quarantine some years later!

Let's start from the beginning. To develop my doctoral thesis, during my stay in Mexico I decided to travel to Houston, Texas to interview some Mexican migrant women. In April 2009 I travelled from Monterrey to Houston, where I stayed for one week over the Easter Break. I remember that I was excited because this fieldwork had been extremely useful for my thesis and I was ready to continue the interviews in Monterrey. It was my surprise when some days after returning to Monterrey my life completely changed due to the swine flu pandemic!

In that period, in Monterrey I was giving Italian language and culture classes at the university to earn some extra money, and I remember that when the lessons started again after the Easter break the situation had dramatically changed. I had adopted the antivirus mask, but it was so difficult to teach while wearing it. I finally decided not to use it anymore when a student told me that I was racist for wearing it. According to him, my adopting the mask, as a foreigner, would mean establishing a barrier between myself and my students – suggesting that I considered Mexicans as a potential threat. On that occasion, I decided not to answer him because I thought that this comment was due to the panic experienced by all of us, but I remembered his words.



Anyway, this situation did not last so long because on the 23rd of April schools and universities closed, and I remained isolated at home for the next two weeks. The President had declared the quarantine.

In Mexico the situation with swine flu was dramatic because the infections increased every day, along with the death toll. It was the most affected country and I did not know what to do; some days I wanted to return to Italy because I was afraid of getting sick, and other times I thought that I could resist until the swine flu contagions decreased.

During the quarantine, I tried to work on my doctoral thesis to take advantage of the enforced rest, but it was very hard to focus on intellectual work, so I decided to use my energy to paint all the walls of my small apartment. This was a wise decision because it meant that I spent my time without thinking about the terrible situation, at least for a few hours. Using my muscles gave me the opportunity to tire myself out so much that I no longer had space to think about the effects and the risks of swine flu. Moreover, I was very proud of myself - it was the first time that I redecorated a house and the result was gorgeous!

At the beginning of May there had been a significant decrease in infections, so the lockdown ended and life gradually returned to normal in Monterrey. However, now here I am again, finding myself in the epicenter of a virus outbreak, just

like I had been in 2009.

Italy was the first country to reach the highest death toll. Unfortunately, this time the situation seems worse than in 2009, as the pandemic is affecting a larger portion of the world and generating many other consequences.

I have been in quarantine in Rome since 10th March but on this occasion, I will not be able to redecorate my apartment...I already did so in August 2019. If I would have known the future, then I would have waited!

If I ask myself what else I have learnt from my experience in the 2009 swine flu last quarantine (apart from painting walls), I have to say, with a bit of sadness, "not so much". Both situations are very different. Two different countries, two different ways of life. Nothing is comparable, not even the way we obtain food.

I remember that during the quarantine in Monterrey I went to the supermarket with my only precaution being the 'antivirus' face mask, while in Rome we must wait in line maintaining at least a meter distance between us, and we have to wait for our turn to enter so that there is no crowd of people inside the supermarket.



As I mentioned before, these are two situations that are very different. It is impossible to compare the restrictive measures of a densely inhabited neighborhood of Rome in which I live and those relating to the neighborhood where I lived in Monterrey with a smaller number of inhabitants. Nevertheless, if I think about people, I have learnt something. In both situations, it seems that when suffering affects a large portion of people regardless of their social position, solidarity becomes palpable and small or large gestures of help become numerous, as it can be seen in one of my photos, where a message says: "If you are in, need take it. Come on Italy." Moreover, when we have to leave our homes to shop for basic necessities, kindness pervades social relationships despite distancing.



I am sure that this long period of quarantine will give me new ideas for reflection and a different approach to the pandemic condition as well as will probably change my life more than the pandemic of 2009 did. However, as a famous Italian singer, Lucio Battisti, in 1980 sang in the refrain of the song entitled '*Con il nastro rosa*' (With the pink ribbon):

"lo sapremo solo vivendo".

It means that we will not be able to know what will happen except through the experience of these days.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Sara holds a PhD in Migration Studies from the University Pablo de Olavide in Seville (Spain), an MA in "Encounter Policies and Cultural Mediation. Knowledge and rights practice for a new citizenship in a migratory context" from the University Roma Tre (Italy) and a BA with a specialisation in the Demo-ethno- anthropological subjects at the University Sapienza di Roma (Italy).

Sara Salvatori has conducted fieldwork in Mexico, United States, Italy, Morocco, Spain and Chile, has published articles in different peer reviewed journals and has participated in many international conferences.

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