Social distancing or distancing the social? A non-anthropocentric approach in anthropology

¿Distanciamiento social o distanciamiento de lo social? Un enfoque no antropocéntrico en antropología

Distanciamento social ou distanciamento do social? Uma abordagem não antropocêntrica em antropologia

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1

Abstract: Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT), as well as contemporary 'beyond the human' anthropology, promote a non-anthropocentric approach to the social sciences, considering non-human entities as a part of the social world. From this non-anthropocentric approach, this article aims to challenge the use of 'social distancing' as an accurate term, the qualifier 'social' being associated to human beings only. If distancing is a key concept to prevent human-to-human COVID-19 transmission, it would be more accurate to talk about physical or bodily human distancing. By talking about social distancing, we are actually distancing the social, narrowing its complexity, as it is composed by entities that are not necessarily human or even visible to our eyes, such as the new coronavirus. This article is an invitation to look for alternative terms to the concept of 'social distancing' that enable us to better express the complexity of the social in a less anthropocentric way.

Keywords: Social distancing. COVID-19. Non-anthropocentric anthropology. Humans and non-humans. Social world. Auto-ethnography.

Resumen: Los Estudios de Ciencia y Tecnología (Science and Technology Studies [STS]) y la Teoría del Actor-Red (Actor-Network Theory [ANT]), junto con la antropología "más allá de lo humano", promueven un enfoque no antropocéntrico en las ciencias sociales, donde las entidades no humanas hacen parte del mundo social. Desde dicha perspectiva no antropocéntrica, este artículo tiene como objetivo cuestionar el uso de "distanciamiento social" como un término preciso, donde el calificativo "social" se asocia únicamente a seres humanos. Si el distanciamiento es un concepto clave para prevenir el contagio de COVID-19 entre seres humanos, sería más correcto hablar de distanciamiento físico o corporal. Al hablar de distanciamiento social, en realidad estamos distanciando lo social, reduciendo su complejidad, ya que está compuesto por entidades que no son necesariamente humanas o incluso visibles a nuestros ojos, como el nuevo coronavirus. Este artículo invita a buscar términos alternativos al concepto de "distanciamiento social" que nos permitan expresar mejor la complejidad de lo social de una manera menos antropocéntrica.

Palabras clave: Distanciamiento social. COVID-19. Antropología no antropocéntrica. Humanos y no humanos. Mundo social. Auto-etnografía.

2

Resumo: Os Estudos de Ciência e Tecnologia (Science and Technology Studies [STS]) e a Teoria Ator-Rede (Actor-Network Theory [ANT]), bem como a antropologia contemporânea "além do humano", promovem uma abordagem não antropocêntrica nas ciências sociais, considerando as entidades não humanas parte do mundo social. Sob essa perspectiva não antropocêntrica, este artigo busca questionar o uso de "distanciamento social" como um termo preciso, sendo o qualificador "social" associado apenas a seres humanos. Se o distanciamento é um conceito-chave para prevenir a transmissão de COVID-19 entre seres humanos, seria mais correto falar em distanciamento físico ou corporal humano. Ao falar em distanciamento social, na verdade estamos distanciando o social, estreitando sua complexidade, que é composta por entidades não necessariamente humanas nem visíveis a olho nu, como é o caso do novo coronavírus. Este artigo nos convida a procurar termos alternativos ao

conceito de "distanciamento social" que possibilitem expressar melhor a complexidade do social de modo menos antropocêntrico.

3

Introduction

> The object of study for sociology is not human beings but being human.
> That simple rephrasing immediately highlights the sociotechnologies
> that are apart from our brains and bodies but are a part of our
> humanity.
> (STARK, 2011, p. 336)

On March 18, 2020, *The Daily Show*, hosted by the comedian Trevor Noah, changed its name to *The Daily Social Distancing Show*. Since then, he has been broadcasting his TV show from his house in New York, one of the epicenters of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time. This renaming clearly illustrates the increasing use of the term 'social distancing,' not only by the various media, but by individuals around the world as well: '*distanciamiento social*' (Spanish), '*distanza sociale*' (Italian), '*distanciation sociale*' or '*distance sociale*' (French). A Google search in English gives us a general idea: 61,100,000 results on the web on July 16, 2020. Although 'physical distancing' is also used (e.g. CDC, 2020), 'social distancing' is much more frequently used, even in academic writings (e.g. ASSCHE *et al*., 2020; MARCHESI, 2020; NISHI, 2020).

From a non-anthropocentric approach, this article aims to challenge the use of 'social distancing' as an accurate term – not the noun 'distancing,' but the qualifier 'social.' I argue that the latter narrows the way we perceive the social, reducing it to human beings. Recent papers in anthropology have been detaching from this correlation 'social = (only) human.' From Philippe Descola to Tim Ingold, there is an emergence of a 'non-anthropocentric anthropology' (CITTON and WALENTOWITZ, 2012, p. 37, our translation). Science and Technology Studies (STS) (LATOUR, 1984; LATOUR and WOOLGAR, 1979; VINCK, 1992, 1999; VINCK *et al.*, 2019) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (CALLON, 2013; JÓHANNESSON, REN and VAN DER DUIM, 2012; LATOUR, 1999, 2005; LAW, 2009) – see '*sociologie de la traduction*' as well (AKRICH, CALLON and LATOUR, 2013; CALLON, 1986) – also apply

4

this non-anthropocentric approach, considering the materiality, the artifacts, and other non-human entities as a part of our social world (VINCK, 2009), including, for instance, viruses like HIV (DIJSTELBLOEM, 2014), N1H1 (AYLESWORTH-SPINK, 2017; FRENCH and MYKHALOVSKIY, 2013), and now the new coronavirus (SARS-Cov-2) (BYCHKOVA, 2020; COMAROFF, 2020; LINDE-OZOLA, 2020; SELIM, 2020). Despite critiques, the ontological turn in anthropology draws on this approach as well, demonstrating that the presence of non-human entities plays a role in the social dynamics throughout the globe.

This article is an invitation to critically rethink how the term 'social distancing' is used by taking a non-anthropocentric perspective. If distancing is a prominent concept to prevent human-to-human COVID-19 transmission, perhaps it would be more accurate to talk of physical or bodily human distancing. In order to argue for this, the present article is structured as follows. First, I define the term 'social distancing' as it is commonly used nowadays. Then, I challenge this term from the perspective of a non-anthropocentric anthropology. Some empirical examples are shown in the COVID-19 context to support this theoretical view. Finally, I discuss the importance of changing the way we see the social, in order to critically think about alternatives to the concept of 'social distancing,' which enable us to better illustrate the complexity of the social, allowing us to go beyond the human by adopting a less anthropocentric focus.

What is social distancing? Who is distancing from whom or what?

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020) defines 'social distancing' as "keeping a safe space between yourself and other people who are not from your household" and the recommendation is to "stay at least 6 feet (about 2 arms' length) [1.5 meters approximately] from other people who are not from

your household in both indoor and outdoor spaces." Even though the recommended distance can vary from one country to another (ranging from 1 meter to 2 meters)[1], the idea of social distancing remains valid as a useful measure to prevent human-to-human COVID-19 transmission. It is worthy noticing that the CDC also uses the term 'physical distancing' as a synonym, but the latter is much less frequent. In contrast, the John Hopkins Medicine distinguishes between the two terms. According to this institute, the CDC's view of social distancing corresponds to 'physical distancing,' whereas 'social distancing' means "staying home and away from others as much as possible to help prevent spread of COVID-19" (JOHNS HOPKINS MEDICINE, 2020).

Despite these differences, the idea of distancing remains the same, whether it is qualified as social or physical. Both definitions refer entirely to human beings and this is actually the way we conceive social distancing in the time of COVID-19 pandemic. The example of *The Daily Social Distancing Show* at the beginning of this article illustrates the use made by the media that encompasses the idea of humans distancing themselves from each other. Trevor Noah and other players in the media industry replicate this idea and spread it to their worldwide audience. Political players and institutions, like the World Health Organization (WHO), stress the need of social distancing to halt the spread of COVID-19.

Also in academia, social scientists tend to use the concept of 'social distancing' in the same way. For instance, in a recent publication of the journal *Social Anthropology*, several authors overtly use this term. Klerk (2020) exposes the idea of a "1.5-metre society" based on the concept of social distancing that includes human beings only. Nathalie Magnani and Matthew Magnani (2020) explain how social distancing has huge effects on ethnographical fieldwork. From a Foucauldian perspective of biopower, Mann (2020, p. 316) claims that "social distancing [is] based on avoidance of the other." Other authors, like Marchesi (2020) and Nishi (2020), use the term in the very title of their articles: the first to give the

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1 The recommended distance can even vary within a country, as shown by the Peruvian case (see ahead in the text).

idea of 'stay at home' as an 'act of solidarity' in Italy; and the second to explain how *jishuku* or voluntary restraint (a Japanese emic term close to the idea of social distancing) has impacted autistic children in Japan during the pandemic outbreak. These authors use the concept of social distancing without questioning it, but usually there are few voices that showcase critical insights about it. Presterudstuen (2020, p. 335) states that:

> The inherent ambiguity of the term "social distancing" has been belatedly acknowledged by institutions such as the WHO, but judging from its widespread use the horse may have bolted to substitute this problematic misnomer with a more appropriate focus on spatial distancing.

The author actually prefers the use of 'spatial distancing' as stated above. Kelman (2020, p. 296) also prefers the term 'physical distancing' to stress "the important premise that we need to remain as socially close as possible without physical proximity." Both authors have their own arguments to avoid the misleading term 'social distancing.' Even though 'spatial' or 'physical' are more accurate to tackle the need for distancing in the midst of COVID-19, all authors are referring to human beings. Kelman (2020, p. 296) even highlights the need for being "socially close," associating this with "social = human." However, it is worth asking: can we get the social closer to human beings only?

Reassembling the social: redefining and broadening the social, beyond the human

In *Reassembling the social*, Bruno Latour (2005) criticizes classic sociology and its exponents, especially Pierre Bourdieu and Erving Goffman, for reducing the social to human beings. Indeed, Bourdieu's structuralism and Goffman's interactionism promote a sociology centered on humans, namely 'social agents' or 'social

actors' (see these critiques in LATOUR, 2006, p. 121; cf. CALLON, 1986, p. 185). In *La distinction*, Bourdieu (1979) looks at the material world like artifacts that represent a mere reflection of human agents' social distinction. Before him, *The presentation of self in everyday life* (GOFFMAN, 1959) reduces non-human entities to a background of the social scene, featuring human beings as protagonists in his sociology. Social sciences have inherited from these sociologists the way to look at the social as dominated by human entities. All the rest belong to the background or are used strategically for human agency (see critiques in TERRY, 2019, p. 39-44).

In his book, Latour (2005) invites us to reframe sociology and broaden the definition of the social to encompass non-human entities. According to the sociologist, the social is actually not associated only with humans, but also with other entities that constitute the social world we live in. *Reassembling the social* could be read as a methodology guideline to introduce ANT, a theory-methodology based on previous studies by the author (LATOUR, 1984, 1987, 1999; cf. CALLON and LATOUR, 1991; LATOUR and WOOLGAR, 1979) and other colleagues (CALLON, 1986; CALLON, RIP and LAW, 1986). ANT promotes an alternative sociology different from Bourdieu's or Goffman's sociology. ANT is a "sociology of associations" (LATOUR, 2005, p. 9), where social actors are humans and non-humans alike, constantly in interaction with one another[2] and recreating networks between them. These networks are dynamic, heterogeneous, and their extension varies (LATOUR, 2005; VINCK, 1992; cf. JULIEN and ROSSELIN, 2009; RECH, 2014). Each actor participates in the composition of networks and their extensions. ANT can be read as a theory of action, too, since it explains how action in daily life emerges from the reassembling of actors-in-networks. In the French version of his book, Latour (2006, p. 104-105) clearly states that there is no social science if we do not consider every entity, human or not, that participates in the action. This is also argued by other ANT scholars studying, for instance, tourism (JÓHANNESSON, REN and VAN DER DUIM, 2012; REN,

2 The term 'interaction' should be taken herein as actors in contact as well as 'inter-action,' i.e. collective action between (inter) human and non-human actors (see TERRY, 2019, p. 42-43).

2011), objects like textiles (TERRY, 2019, 2020a; VENKATESAN, 2009) or Cuban cigars (SIMONI, 2012). STS scholars have contributed to reframing the social in this way by showing how technology and artifacts have an influence on it (BARBIER and TRÉPOS, 2007; JULIEN and ROSSELIN, 2009; VEYRAT, BLANCO and TROMPETTE, 2007), by taking into account "the materiality of the social things" (VINCK, 2009, p. 52, our translation).

Then, *Reassembling the social* should be taken as an invitation to rethink the social and dissociate it from its human connotation. Surely, human beings are part of the social, but the social is not only human. Here, "reassembling the social" means to put together all its components, human and non-human. From an ANT perspective, entities like viruses take part in and influence the social, as Latour (2005, p. 7) mentions, using the example of SARS viruses that affect our lives, such as the new coronavirus. The author insists on the idea of sociology as a "science of the living together," a phrase previously coined by Laurent Thévenot (2004) (LATOUR, 2005, p. 2). "Living together" is a prominent idea to rethink the social right now, in the pandemic crisis context. In 2020, we learned that we are not alone. The new coronavirus is something that we have been living with! Although invisible to our human eyes, this microscopic non-human entity indubitably influences our lives.

Apart from ANT and STS researchers, contemporary anthropologists invite us to look differently at our social world as well. In *Being alive*, Tim Ingold (2011) extends such an invitation by using the concept of 'togethering'[3], which is another way to represent the idea of living together. Through his phenomenological approach, Ingold (2011) promotes an 'anthropology *with*' that differs from the classic 'anthropology *of*' something. The preposition *with* is used to argue that humans are surrounded by and live *with* other entities: animals, plants, wind, and so on. They are part of our social world. Other anthropologists, like Philippe Descola, have insisted that human beings in various socio-geographic contexts perceive and even live different realities. In *Par-delà de la nature*, the

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3 He reformulates the idea of 'togetherness,' proposed by Hägerstrand (1976, p. 332).

four ontologies (naturalism, animism, totemism, and analogism) proposed by Descola (2005) show different ways to make sense of the social world. If this ontological approach can be challenged (BESSIRE and BOND, 2014; CEPEK, 2013, 2016; GRAEBER, 2015; VOIROL, 2013), the main argument here is that Descola (2005) shed light on the existence of entities that are not human, but they are still important for societies to exist. Eduardo Kohn (2013) contributes to the perspective of Descola (2005) by proposing an anthropology beyond the human. Through an ontological framework, other anthropologists have taken this path, showing the social beyond the human. In *Earth beings*, for instance, Marisol de la Cadena (2015) shows the importance of the Pachamama (mother Earth) and the Apus (spirit of the sacred mountains) for indigenous Andean populations in Peru. They communicate *with* these sacred entities to ensure the continuity of their social world. In the same region, Cometti (2015, 2018) and Cometti, Fabiano and Terry (2020) highlight this importance as well among the Q'eros, a Quechua-speaking indigenous population of the Cusco region (Peru). In his book, Cometti (2015) explains how the Q'eros interpret climate change as a lack of rituals *with* the Pachamama and the Apus. In a novel manner, this anthropologist correlates migration with the Q'eros' explanation of climate change: since *paqos* (shamans) are migrating to the city[4], the Q'eros has been unable to perform rituals that prevent catastrophes, such as the effects of climate change on farming and livestock. Then, the existence of their social world depends on the continuity of the relationship between the Q'eros and their divinities. The constant need of perpetuating this human/non-human relationship can also be observed during the Quyllurit'i pilgrimage, where the Q'eros pilgrims reconnect *with* divinities, either Catholic or non-Catholic (COMETTI, FABIANO and TERRY, 2020).

4 It is not only a matter of migration. The increasing interest on money and shamanic tourism market leads several paqos to prefer ritual performances for tour operators and new age tourists rather than for the local purposes explained above (see HILL, 2005, 2008; MOLINIÉ, 2012; TERRY, 2019). As I could witness, these paqos provides their services not only in Cusco and other Peruvian cities, but also around the world.

All these contemporary anthropologists highlight the necessity of considering non-human entities. With reference to anthropologists like Tim Ingold and Philippe Descola (and social scientists like Bruno Latour), Citton and Walentowitz (2012, p. 37, our translation) talk about a "non-anthropocentric anthropology" (cf. TERRY, 2019, p. 401-403)[5]. If we can see the interest of non-human entities in classic anthropological theory (e.g. MAUSS, 1950)[6], contemporary anthropologists along with ANT and STS scholars have been promoting more explicitly and recently this non-anthropocentric approach in the social sciences. Perhaps COVID-19, as a 'social agent'[7], represents "a chance to free [our] worldview from the myth of anthropocentrism" (KAWALEC, 2020, p. 295).

A non-anthropocentric auto-ethnography of the COVID-19 age

Having provided my proposal with a theoretical explanation that takes a non-anthropocentric approach to the social sciences, now I show it from an empirical viewpoint, drawing on auto-ethnography. The latter is "a method that allows ethnographers

5 It is true that authors like Ingold, Descola and Latour do not share the same theoretical ideas and approaches. For instance, Ingold's phenomenology differs from Descola's and Latour's approach (LAPLANTE and INGOLD, 2016, p. 226-228; cf. DESCOLA, 2016; DESCOLA and INGOLD, 2014). Ingold himself acknowledges significant differences to Latour in particular. He critiques Latour's ANT as inaccurately looking at the social world as a set of inter-connected points, i.e. network, preferring a "meshwork" approach to seeing it as "an interweaving of lines" (INGOLD, 2011, p. 64-65, p. 85). According to the author, ANT makes Latour's non-humans "resolutely inanimate" (INGOLD, 2012, p. 436), putting the emphasis on "the interactive convocation of existing entities" but not "on the co-responsive movement of occurrent things along their manifold lines of becoming" as suggested by Ingold (2012, p. 437). Besides, arguing that nobody/nothing possesses agency but that "they are rather possessed by the action", Ingold challenges Latour's agency conception assimilating the latter to the idea of intention-agency proposed by Gell (1998), which tends to hierarchize "primary agency" (humans') over "second agency" (non-humans') (INGOLD, 2011, p. 213-214), though it is a misleading assimilation (see TERRY, 2019, p. 43, p. 401-402; VENKATESAN, 2009, p. 83-84), since ANT examines carefully all "entities that participate in the action" (LATOUR, 2006, p. 103-104, our translation) and invites to acknowledge "uncertainty about the sources of action" (LATOUR, 2006, p. 86, our translation). However, beyond their theoretical discrepancies, these authors promote a "non-anthropocentric anthropology" which is the point I want to make here. If we must acknowledge these theoretical differences, we also have to highlight their common contribution to this anthropology. Authors like Ingold and Latour end up sharing a perspective that challenges dichotomies (micro/macro, local/global, human/non-human) and insist on mediums (either meshwork or network) that "inhabit us and [...] that we inhabit" (CITTON and WALENTOWITZ, 2012, p. 37, our translation).

6 It is worthy mentioning that Mauss' theory on social ties is based on things that are shared between humans and motivated by hau, i.e. the spirit of the given thing. His theory shows how things actively participate to the social (cf. BOAS, 1888; MALINOWSKI, 1922).

7 To be more specific, drawn on the theory proposed by Gell (1998), Kawalec (2020, p. 295) considers coronavirus "not as mere extension of human agency, but as the primary social agent – the 'invisible enemy'." The discourse of non-human agency is another way to open the door out of anthropocentrism. Several authors insist, for instance, on things' agency (GOSDEN, 2005; INGOLD, 2006; SILLAR, 2009; TORRICO, 1989; VENKATESAN, 2009).

to use their own experience as a route through which to produce academic knowledge" (PINK, 2009, p. 64) or "theoretical understanding" (ANDERSON, 2013, p. 83)[8].

Despite the alleged subjectivity and narcissism (see ATKINSON, 1997; COFFEY, 1999; DELAMONT, 2013), many studies advocate this method as it allows an understanding of the author's social world (LANCASTER, 2011), inter-subjectivity (PINK, 2009), and view of social phenomena (ESSÉN and WINTERSTORM, 2012). Auto-ethnography has gained an increasingly recognized place in social sciences (ANDERSON, 2013; SIKES, 2013b; ELLIS and BOCHNER, 2013). Some researchers use it to study, for instance, tourism (BROUGÈRE, 2014; MORGAN and PRITCHARD, 2005; NOY, 2008; TERRY, 2020d), contemporary dance (VIONNET, 2018), viruses like HIV (DIJSTELBLOEM, 2014), H1N1 (AYLESWORTH-SPINK, 2017), and more recently COVID-19 (GERBAUDO SUÁREZ, GOLÉ and PÉREZ, 2020; TERRY, 2020b, 2020c). Indeed, the ongoing pandemic has pushed numerous anthropologists to stop doing fieldwork in various parts of the planet, because of lockdowns, travel restrictions, and researchers' safety concerns. According to Kuiper (2020, p. 301), "ethnographic fieldwork is [then] quarantined" and anthropologists have to find methodological alternatives to this challenging situation, for instance, through digital ethnography (e.g. BYCHKOVA, 2020; GELLNER, 2020; MEZA, 2020); others "have shifted their focus to 'home'" (KUIPER, 2020, p. 301), engaging in auto-ethnography, just as I did in my hometown in Peru.

In this section, I use auto-ethnography to show the presence of COVID-19 and its effects on the new everyday realities that we have been facing since the virus outbreak. The idea of "living with" (alluding to Ingold, 2011) allows us to draw on auto-ethnographic accounts to highlight the importance of taking a non-anthropocentric view of the social world and considering the presence and agency of non-human entities. Here, I introduce two stories stemming from field notes and factual information taken

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8 For further information on auto-ethnography, its use, relevance, and criticism, see Terry (2019, p. 86-90), Méndez (2011), Sikes (2013a). It is worth noticing that all ethnography – classical method in anthropology – is "an auto-ethnography that is ignored" (BROUGÈRE, 2014, p. 157, our translation), whose claim depends on each author (ELLIS and BOCHNER, 2013, p. 138). There is therefore an auto-ethnography/ethnography continuum, which varies from one author to another.

from media reports. Each story takes place in the city of Cusco at various moments of the pandemic: the first during the generalized quarantine, the second within the post-quarantine phase. In both cases, there is a textual approach[9]: the two stories have been reworked through field notes. Although each story begins by describing one-day lived experiences and observations, they provide information from previous or subsequent days in relation to a specific aspect expressed in the description.

These stories were prepared both inside and outside the domestic space. I was living with my maternal family, which consists of ten members living in a four-floor building: my mother, my sister, my nephew (second floor), my uncle, his wife, and his four children (fourth floor; two living with them and two on the third floor), and my grand-mother (living alone in another apartment on the fourth floor). Even though I had an apartment for myself (third floor), I interacted with other family members on a regular basis, for instance, during breakfast and lunch. Thus, we all interacted with each other to a certain degree, and this pushed us to take some measures to prevent COVID-19 within the family, especially because my mother (68 years old) and my grand-mother (90 years old) were considered vulnerable to disease and because the number of cases were escalating dramatically in Cusco (TERRY, 2020b). Auto-ethnography has become pertinent in my case not only as a useful methodological tool in the pandemic context, as described ahead, but also as a preventive measure to reduce contact with people outside (as I would do through a classical ethnography approach). Moreover, it is a pertinent look at the social world and its dynamics, which includes non-human entities. Actually, drawing on auto-ethnography in the COVID-19 age has allowed me to identify their presence more than ever, along with changes in my everyday life, as I argued elsewhere (TERRY, 2020a, 2021). Since COVID-19 arrived in Peru (officially in March 2020), governmental measures such as lockdown, curfew, and travel restrictions were taken (see ASENSIO, 2020; TERRY and

9 Every ethnographic account is "an orderly and coherent textual construction that is not comparable to the raw field notes taken during empirical research" (VOIROL, 2013, p. 51, our translation).

CHICHIZOLA, 2021), and my everyday life has completely changed. Before, I used to travel freely inside and outside Peru (for tourism, family visit, and academic purposes), spend time with friends, go out to bars and restaurants (including street food vending sites), do fieldwork interacting with people, work in libraries, and so on. Before the pandemic, I did not care much about possible virus and disease transmission through people, food, objects, etc. As I show through auto-ethnography, the pandemic has brought me to realize the importance of human and non-human inter-connection in virus transmission and its preventive measures (e.g. face mask use), highlighting the importance of a non-anthropocentric look at the contemporary social world.

Tuesday, April 21

I change my clothes, grab the usual backpack, and get ready to leave for the supermarket. A disposable face mask and a scarf protect my nose and mouth. Before going out, I change into a pair of shoes I only use on the street, as a preventive measure. I also wear disposable gloves as a supplementary measure. I leave a bottle of alcohol hand sanitizer at the entrance that I will spray on my shoes, clothes, and hands when I return. All this is part of a family prevention protocol.

On my way to the supermarket, I come across a Venezuelan man who sells masks, gloves, and alcohol hand sanitizer, among other hygiene and protection products (Figure 1). I take this opportunity to buy some nitrile gloves. He claims that they protect more than the ones I was wearing (latex gloves). It is worth mentioning that then the Peruvian government was requiring glove use in banks and stores (Supreme Decree No. 083-2020-PCM), but later people were recommended not to use gloves (erratum to the decree), for not being an effective preventive measure, as announced by the Peruvian infectologist Juan Villena (ATV Noticias edición matinal, May 12, 2020). Also, gloves do not prevent contagion,

since COVID-19 transmission can occur regardless of them, which generate a "false sense of security, it could be more harmful than beneficial" (PERU21TV, 2020, our translation).

On my way, I see several policemen hanging around street corners and controlling whether governmental measures have been observed. Ten minutes later, I arrive at the supermarket. At the door, a woman puts alcohol hand sanitizer in my hands and checks if I am abiding the mandatory mask use. Inside, about forty people circulate through the corridors. Sometimes it is hard to keep the recommended 1-meter inter-individual distance. Narrow corridors and crowds prevent this from happening every now and then. I am surprised to see some couples, because the supermarket warns that "only one person per family unit is allowed (Supreme Decree No. 064-2020-PCM)." Whether they are family members or not, people are not allowed to go shopping accompanied in any case. I try to buy everything I can to delay the next visit to the supermarket and limit outside contact. Other Peruvians who lack a refrigerator (YON, 2020) need to go shopping more often than my family does.

Figure 1. Selling hygiene and protection products against COVID-19

Source: Author's personal collection.

Getting out of the supermarket, I see couples sitting together on the buses, without proper physical distancing. Other couples use their private cars, something which was not allowed at that time (only by mid-June private cars and taxis will be allowed to operate).

I leave my purchases at home and wash my hands with soap and water. Minutes later, Santos arrives, a Q'ero man to whom I must give 100 dollars on behalf of Gaïl, a Swiss anthropologist who is a close friend to him. Having arrived by bus from San Sebastían (a district in the province of Cusco)[10], he wears gloves and a mask, just like me. We meet at the door. Worried, he tells me not to know when tourism will resume. Being a guide, some of his groups have already canceled their trips. He has no income and claims not to have received any government bonds so far – the government issued a series of bonds to help those who are tackling hardships (see TRIVELLI, 2020a, 2020b). He wanted to return to his community, because "*at least there is food and you live off the harvest [but] they [the villagers] no longer let you in*." I say goodbye handing him the money, some backpacks, and flashlights that Gaïl had left for him.

In the afternoon, Río arrives accompanied by his father, who lives in San Jerónimo (another district in the province of Cusco). Separated from Daría, my sister, he shares the custody of Río. Due to COVID-19, Río has been spending 10 days with each of them (instead of 7 days), to reduce the number of trips per month. His father brought him today. On the earlier occasions, I was in charge of picking him up, using the public bus service (taxis were prohibited from operating due to the pandemic at that time). Since the pandemic began, bus passengers have worn masks. They mainly use them to go shopping, for instance in Vinocanchón, the largest supply market in Cusco, located in San Jerónimo. Although the number of public transport passengers has decreased significantly, the recommended physical distancing has not always been observed. But things are going to change. A month later, the Peruvian government imposed a 50% capacity reduction in

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10 Just like other Peruvian regions, the Cusco is divided into provinces and districts. The province of Cusco (which shares the same name of the region) has seven districts that make up the city of Cusco.

public transport, with everyone sitting in an interspersed manner (Figure 2), forcing people to practice physical distancing to prevent COVID-19 infections. Nevertheless, people are always at risk on buses, as well as in markets and stores, both are major sources of infection (see CHAPARRO, 2020; TANAKA, 2020; YON, 2020)[11]. Even so, during Easter, a multitude of *Cusqueños* (Cusco inhabitants) gathered to purchase food to celebrate holidays, as shown on TV.

Figure 2. Physical distancing on buses

Source: Author's personal collection.

At dinner, Daría feels worried about her lack of a job; as an independent worker, she has no regular income or any State assistance (she does not fall into the beneficiary categories). She works in theater and pedagogy, two industries strongly affected by the pandemic. Living with my retired mother, at least she does not pay rent. "*Just think of those who are tenants*" she exclaims. The rest of the family lives off their savings, without being able to reopen the event center that my family owns, their principal source of income (it will open on July 7, as a restaurant only for a month). Working

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11 According to serological COVID-19 tests conducted by the central and regional Peruvian governments, several local markets, especially in the capital city, have shown more than 50% of positive cases, some even more than 80% (the national average being 36% out of the 5,065 people evaluated). Thus, many markets were closed (ATV Noticias edición matinal, May 25, 2020).

remotely, I have been less impacted: I write articles, advise college students, participate in virtual conferences, etc.

My mother raises her voice and comments on 'illegal' practices regarding physical distancing measures such as food delivery services: "my friends gave me some [food] delivery contacts." Other people have started to reopen their restaurants – officially not allowed to operate until July 20 (EL PERUANO, 2020b). Those are actually 'illegal' ways of generating income in the COVID-19 age. "*People are desperate,*" replies Daría. "*Many of them work in tourism and now it is paralyzed,*" she adds. On a Cusco TV program I heard that the industry will take two years to recover. "*We will have to reconvert ourselves*" says a businesswoman (Telesur Noticias, April 4, 2020). Jean-Paul Benavente – regional governor of the Cusco region – announces later on that 120,000 people have lost their jobs due to the suspension of tourism activities (ATV Noticias edición matinal, June 16, 2020). Richi – a friend of mine who used to give cooking lessons to tourists – will start selling ceviche by delivery services (WhatsApp, May 5, 2020) despite its prohibition at the time (food delivery will be officially back only in June). Another friend who owns a coffee bar also sent me a picture on *WhatsApp* containing the list of his products (WhatsApp, May 5, 2020). In July, Daría will start giving virtual lesson to children. Since March 6, the government prohibited face-to-face classes at schools, universities, and institutes. My nephew Río, for instance, no longer attends school – he has online classes (one hour a day) since that date, through the *Google Meet* application, activated on my sister's cell phone. Besides her work as virtual teacher, Daría will start selling food by delivery services, i.e. homemade *causas*, a Peruvian dish elaborated with mashed potatoes and chicken.

The COVID-19 has become a daily topic of conversation. We closely follow the news about the evolution of the coronavirus and the measures taken against this 'invisible enemy,' as Martín Vizcarra – the Peruvian president – and other presidents have described it. When we go out and return, we just do not know if the virus came home with us. If a family member is infected, it is
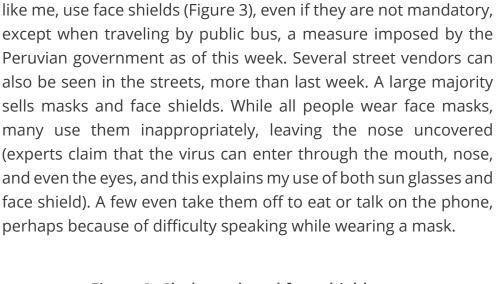
likely that the others will also be infected, because of our daily and close contact, without wearing face masks and often interacting less than 1 meter apart from each other. My uncle and cousins still greet my grandmother with kisses. I have made the decision to greet her by keeping physical distance as a preventive measure.

Friday, July 24

I am heading downtown to go to the bank. The situation in Cusco is getting critical, doctors from all three public hospitals in the city announced that the health system's 'collapse' was already reality. This situation is "*due to a lack of ICU beds,*" as Dr. Humaní, from the ESSALUD hospital, reports (CTC El Matutino, July 23, 2020). In fact, before leaving this morning, I received a video on *WhatsApp* in which Dr. Víctor del Carpio – president of the COVID Command of the Cusco region – states, in front of cameras and wearing a face mask, the intent to "*include Cusco in quarantine for 14 days with restriction of land and air transport,*" in order to deal with the critical public health situation. He calls for "*social distancing*" and "*face mask use.*" It is a "*voluntary quarantine*" for the moment, as the official request has been sent to the Peruvian government to make it mandatory. Cusco has already entered a "*phase of sustained community transmission. It is practically impossible to know who may or may not have COVID,*" as Dr. del Carpio highlights. Doctors do not want the same thing to happen as in neighboring regions like Arequipa, where people are dying due to lack of ICU beds and oxygen (see ZAMBRANO, 2020). Considering this situation, I made the decision to go to the bank today.

Wearing a cloth face mask, a face shield, and sunglasses, I am about to walk down the Avenida del Sol, one of the main arteries in the city. Along the way, I meet people who wear masks of all kinds, some wearing N95 masks that are more expensive than surgical

ones, but have a reputation of offering better protection[12]. Others, like me, use face shields (Figure 3), even if they are not mandatory, except when traveling by public bus, a measure imposed by the Peruvian government as of this week. Several street vendors can also be seen in the streets, more than last week. A large majority sells masks and face shields. While all people wear face masks, many use them inappropriately, leaving the nose uncovered (experts claim that the virus can enter through the mouth, nose, and even the eyes, and this explains my use of both sun glasses and face shield). A few even take them off to eat or talk on the phone, perhaps because of difficulty speaking while wearing a mask.

Figure 3. Cloth mask and face shield

Source: Author's personal collection.

After walking for about 15 minutes, I arrive at the destination. There are a dozen people waiting to enter the bank. In the queue, people practice social distancing, observing the assigned positions marked by circles painted on the ground (Figure 4). Shortly after the quarantine starting date, these circles have been drawn in various parts of the city to make compliance with physical

[12] If it is true that N95masks are among those that best protect people against the coronavirus, they are needed by those who have direct contact with COVID-19 patients; for public use, surgical or cloth masks are enough, according to the Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH, 2020).

distancing guidelines easier, especially at the entrances to banks, supermarkets and, since about a month ago, shopping centers.

While waiting and watching people go by, I perceive certain changes in the city, such as an iconographic sign indicating the minimum 1 meter distance (Figure 5). Now, taxis have a transparent screen (made of fiberglass in some cases) separating the driver's seat from the customers' – there is even a slot for paying and receiving change. These taxis also have alcohol hand sanitizer to avoid infection after handling money or touching the car's surface (Figure 6). The taxi transparent separation screen was required by the Peruvian government as a preventive measure against COVID-19, but not all have complied. In addition, this protocol establishes that the driver and passengers wear masks, that only two people use the rear seat, natural ventilation (not air conditioning) has to be used, and vehicle cleaning and disinfection must be carried out, as stressed by the Minister of Transport and Communications (ATV Noticias edición matinal, June 25, 2020).
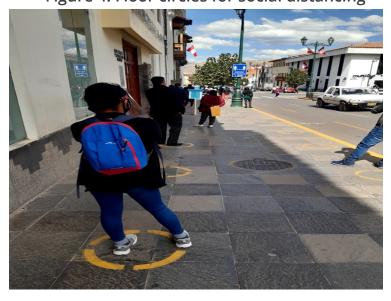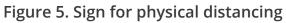
21

Figure 4. Floor circles for social distancing

Source: Author's personal collection.

Figure 5. Sign for physical distancing

Source: Author's personal collection.

Figure 6. A taxi's transparent separation screen

Source: Author's personal collection.

I can finally enter the bank. Before doing so, I am asked to use alcohol hand sanitizer through a foot-operated dispenser, which avoids manual contact. It has been designed to prevent hand-to-hand virus transmission. Bank security workers measure my temperature using an electronic thermometer before letting me in. This electronic device has become common equipment in various business establishments, such as banks and supermarkets.

Inside the bank, all staff members wear face masks and even white overalls to protect their clothing. Customer service spaces are outfitted with a kind of glass – similar to that used in taxis, but much thicker – separating the bank agent from customers. In my case, to carry out the bank procedure I need, I put my fingerprints on a biometric reader and sign a document using a pen offered by the agent. Hence, no matter how much distancing takes place, even a simple, for instance, becomes a means of contact between bank agents and customers. As a preventive measure, I always bring a bottle of alcohol hand sanitizer with me. Meanwhile, other clients are waiting their turn sitting about 1 meter away from each other, leaving a seat empty on which we read: "*for your safety, keep this seat free.*"

Before going home, once again I use alcohol hand sanitizer from the dispenser at the entrance of the bank. Given the critical situation, I strictly observe the preventive measures against COVID-19.

Later on, at home, I welcome a lady who brings us oranges and apples in. She wears a black overall (similar to that used in the bank), a face mask, and a face shield. She receives my payment through an empty cell phone box and puts the change on it. This box contains alcohol hand sanitizer and she sprays it on the bill I gave her. The practice of using this product during commercial transactions has become common as a preventive measure during the pandemic. I also spray alcohol on the money received from third parties. Indeed, this practice is not limited to money: my sister and I are used to disinfecting fruit by diluting alcohol with water.

23

At night, on the regular TV news, the regional governor of Cusco appears at home, as he tested positive for COVID-19 a week ago. He confirms an intent to resume the quarantine due to a significant increased number of COVID-19 cases (300 daily cases) and deaths since the national quarantine starting date, on July 1. The governor claims that "*we must rethink this new social coexistence*," to move forward and tackle the coronavirus-related health and economic crisis (ATV Noticias edición matinal, July 23, 2020).

<div align="center">*</div>

The governor's words serve as a call to the population to learn how to live along with the virus, mainly putting three golden rules into practice: "*wearing [face] masks the right way, staying at least 1.5 meter away from each other, and frequently washing hands with water and soap*" (EL PERUANO, 2020a, our translation). Proper use of face masks "*reduces the chances of person-to-person infection to 1.5%*" (EL PERUANO, 2020a, our translation). The example of face masks illustrates not only the impact of non-human agency on COVID-19 prevention and treatment, but also the important relationship between humans and non-humans to do so (cf. DW NEWS, 2020; NHK WORLD-JAPAN, 2020a), without forgetting proper human distancing guidelines and protocols.

These auto-ethnographic accounts show the abrupt changes caused by COVID-19, which also reveal the virus' impact on human activities, work, economy, physical interactions, etc. These two stories focus on non-human entities coexisting with us in the social world: alcohol hand sanitizer, face shield, cell phone (e.g. for virtual classes), and so on. Among these items, face masks may become an "*incorporated object*" (VEYRAT, BLANCO and TROMPETTE, 2007, our translation), demonstrating "the materiality of social things" (VINCK, 2009, p. 52, our translation) in the COVID-19 age. Their use is now wide-spread across the globe, although some people are reluctant to wear them. If some artifacts contribute to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, others may move in the other direction. The example of a pen in the bank, described in auto-ethnography, depicts the possible COVID-19 infection through objects (cf. NHK

WORLD-JAPAN, 2020b). This is the reason why Peruvian people spray alcohol on money, which is another possible coronavirus spreader.

Discussion: has social distancing been distancing the social?

From ANT to STS – and extending to contemporary anthropologists who are looking *beyond the human* (KOHN, 2013) and promoting an *anthropology with* (INGOLD, 2011) non-humans, a "non-anthropocentric anthropology" (CITTON and WALENTOWITZ, 2012, p. 37) – we have been witnessing a new perspective of what is regarded as the social. The social scientists mentioned here support the argument that the social must be dissociated from human beings as its unique component. We live *with* other beings/things that are part of the social world we live in. We are not alone. Not at all! Our auto-ethnographic accounts have shown the materiality of our social world, consisting of both human and non-human entities. This was already true before the pandemic, but the COVID-19 has highlighted more explicitly the daily importance of non-human actors that (re)create *with* us the social world as we know, as we live in.

This conclusion leads us to this question: is social distancing an accurate concept? Being part of our daily vocabulary since the emergence of COVID-19, and indiscriminately used by the media, politicians, scientists, and most individuals, the term 'social distancing' is rarely called into question. It is used to refer to some physical or bodily distancing that ranges from 1 to 2 meters. Thus, it refers to human distancing rather than social distancing (this is the reason why I avoid using the latter term in auto-ethnographic accounts). If we actually take seriously the definition of the social promoted in this article, social distancing would be something difficult to practice. The social media – as we usually call virtual platforms like *Facebook* and *Instagram* – illustrate the way in which humans interact through technology without physical

contact. These social media, spread worldwide in the 21st century, highlight the constraints to a 'real social distancing.' ANT and STS researchers shed light on these complex human-technology networks that challenge the possibility of a social distancing praxis. So, "sociotechnologies are part of our humanity" (STARK, 2011, p. 336), and authors like Akrich (1987) and Vinck (2006), among other STS scholars, use the term 'socio-technology network' to refer to these human-technology relationships, which have been constantly reconfigured (BARBIER and TRÉPOS, 2007; JULIEN and ROSSELIN, 2009; LATOUR, 2005; VINCK, 2007).

Now, if "social distancing = human physical distancing," the social distancing message could be right in the sense that we have been asked to take care in distancing from each other. Actually, it is important to take this warning seriously, as recommended by epidemiologists, in order to prevent COVID-19 transmission – all over the world, on September 28, 2020, there were 33,526,394 accumulated coronavirus cases and 1,005,662 deaths worldwide (WORLDOMETERS, 2020). Here, I am not arguing against the message behind the concept of social distancing. My concern – from the non-anthropocentric anthropology perspective I have advocated in this article – is that the view of the social is too narrow and that the social distancing discourse has contributed in narrowing the social. The new coronavirus has been showing us that it is part of the social, just as human beings are. Bruno Latour, Tim Ingold, Philippe Descola, and Geremia Cometti, among other non-anthropocentric anthropologists, have shown us a social world constituted by human and non-human beings in various socio-geographic contexts. Their message is that the social is not only human, but human-with-other-beings/things. There is an anthropocentrism and reductionism that frames the social by taking only its human dimension into account. Therefore, this article is an invitation to rid ourselves of this narrow and inaccurate definition of the social. For instance, the auto-ethnographic stories and pictures contained in this article remind us of "the materiality of social things" (VINCK, 2009, p. 52, our translation).

When we keep talking of social distancing, we are actually distancing the social, narrowing its complexity, which encompasses entities not necessarily human and visible to our human eyes, like the new coronavirus, "*the invisible enemy*" as it has been called by some. Enemy or not, this submicroscopic infectious agent has been cohabitating *with* us and rebuilding our social reality. Although this virus is invisible, its actions are not. They become visible through political and public health decisions like quarantine and face mask use, as well as people avoiding each other, staying at home or complying with physical distancing guidelines, in addition to washing their hands and disinfecting surfaces, food, and money, etc. They are also made visible through lockdowns and stopping/slowing down economic activities, as mentioned in the auto-ethnographic accounts. Ultimately, they are visible due to human deaths. These actions – either related to the virus or measures taken against COVID-19 – have become an integral part of the social, as a *collectivity of actors* (Bruno Latour) or a *collectivity of beings/things* (Tim Ingold) that live together and inhabit the Earth.

Therefore, the final message of this article is the need to develop other terms to replace the inaccurate 'social distancing.' If some authors have been proposing suitable alternatives, like 'spatial distancing' (PRESTERUDSTUEN, 2020) or 'physical distancing' (KELMAN, 2020), these alternatives are still referring to humans only. Ilan Kelman (2020, p. 297) is right when he warns that "we need to remain as socially close as possible without physical proximity"[13]. However, we also need to bear in mind that the social goes beyond the human. To conclude, I would like to add that seeing the social this way sheds light on the fact that human beings have been socially connected through other entities, like the new coronavirus and whatever material COVID-19 is transmitted through[14]. The sooner we understand that we are socially connected regardless of direct human physical connection, the sooner we can think of a 'real social distancing,' being aware of all possible

13 'Social distancing' has been shown by social psychologists as triggering ambivalent effects, either exacerbating others' derogation (ASSCHE et al., 2020) or promoting human 'prosociality' (POLITI et al., 2021).

14 Although research studies on COVID-19 still have been in progress, scientists argue for the possibility of COVID-19 transmission through surfaces where the virus has been allowed to spread.

infection networks (in the ANT sense) encompassing the actors-in-networks (human or not) capable of transmitting COVID-19. A rather non-anthropocentric view of the social may be useful to face current and future global challenges like climate change, a thought-provoking idea shared by Bruno Latour (2020) and Philippe Descola (see interview in LECOMPTE, 2020). According to these authors, the COVID-19 pandemic may be a good opportunity to rethink our relationship to the Earth and every being inhabiting it, thus putting into question our 'business as usual' praxis - which is another anthropocentric way of distancing the social due to economic growth and development.

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40