

## A TRAGEDY OF MULTIPLE CAUSES: HOW BRAZIL FAILED TO HANDLE COVID-19 (\*)

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Many studies have highlighted the effects of COVID-19 on pre-existing contexts of inequality. Health and economic risks are experienced differently by people, depending on their occupation, their access to resources that enable their isolation and self-care or care of others, their housing and health conditions. The pandemic affects us collectively, but existing hierarchies and forms of vulnerability determine our ability to deal with its effects.

The same can be said of the political context in which the fight against the pandemic takes place. The state's ability to deal with the disease and its effects does not come about overnight. On the contrary, it is the history of institutionalization and financing of health policies that determine the current responses, especially with regard to treatment of patients who need hospitalization and intensive care. The same applies to the coordination capacity needed to control the pandemic through massive testing and monitoring, as well as the ability to provide economic support to workers and small businesses. They all tell us a little about the recent history of the state – and, of course, how decades of neoliberal hegemony triggered privatization and commodification processes, with patterns that emerge globally, but vary according to local political disputes and resistance.

In the Brazilian case, neoliberalism had a hybrid character, limited by the 1988 democratic Constitution, which was written after a political process where center-left parties and actors played a leading role and was given a remarkably distributive character. But this story ends in 2016 – not because of President Rousseff's impeachment, but because of the opportunities found by those behind it to pass a constitutional amendment that compromised public spending and determined a 20-year divestment policy (EC 95)<sup>[1]</sup>. In 2017, changes in labor legislation made labor relations more "flexible," reducing rights and expanding labor precariousness in a country where the percentage of informal workers is around 40%<sup>[2]</sup>.

But it was in 2018 that the country moved more clearly away from the ideals of redemocratization and the values set forth in the Constitution. Jair Bolsonaro – the far-right candidate

who won the presidential elections after having been, for 30 years, an obscure politician – epitomizes a convergence between sheer neoliberalism that opposes social policies and a conservatism contrary to the human rights agenda that has expanded since the mid-20th century. The contempt for science and mistrust towards scientists and educators were made explicit in his campaign and, after his election, led to an accelerated dismantling of the country's Science and Technology system<sup>[3]</sup> coupled with successive measures to restrict the autonomy and budget of universities.

Supported by a coalition that brings together religious conservative leaders, members of the military who are resentful of criticisms of the 1964 dictatorship and its violence, agricultural-sector entrepreneurs who are thirsty for environmental deregulation, representatives of the arms industry, entrepreneurs who bet on the elimination of labor rights and a family clan close to militiamen, the Bolsonaro government demonstrated, from the beginning, its unpreparedness and contempt for democracy. It also made it clear that it would seek to advance its dominance through continuous institutional crises and attacks and threats to the National Congress and the Federal Supreme Court, such as those staged with mockery by far-right armed groups that set camps in Brasilia [Brazil's capital] and by protesters demanding military intervention who, at the pandemic's outbreak (April 2020), were joined by the president himself and his ministers<sup>[4]</sup>.

This is the scenario in which the Brazilian government treated COVID-19 with disdain. The president trivialized the pandemic and people's pain, disregarded the alternatives to face them, and contributed to misinformation. Tellingly, on June 2, 2020, when Brazil had surpassed 30,000 deaths, registering 1,262 deaths in 24 hours, Bolsonaro stated that "dying is normal"<sup>[5]</sup>. On June 6, the government adopted measures that made it difficult for the public to access data on COVID-19 deaths (reversed after pressure). Shortly afterwards, on June 11, in a live-streaming Facebook video, Bolsonaro encouraged his supporters to invade hospitals and document that they were empty, reinforcing distrust in the reality of the pandemic and its health effects<sup>[6]</sup>. One year and 400,000 deaths later, his



performative irresponsibility has been revealed as intentional strategy to spread the virus<sup>[7]</sup>.

This “death policy” was adopted as a government blueprint. health ministers were frequently replaced during the pandemic, one of whom was a military official with no previous experience in the area. The president, who took a stance against social isolation and in favor of drugs with no proven effect, refused to exercise a coordinating role and increased conflicts with governors and mayors. The Supreme Federal Court had to step in to reaffirm the authority of state and local governments to deal with health emergencies, preventing the federal government from creating more obstacles to subnational policies aimed at containing the pandemic<sup>[8]</sup>.

Given its commitment to sheer neoliberalism and insensitivity to inequality, there had to be great pressure from Congress for measures to address the economic vulnerability created or aggravated by the pandemic. In April 2020, the government issued a Provisional Measure (936) that allowed the reduction of working hours and wages, with the objective of reducing layoffs. It was also at this time that a monthly aid of 600 reais (about \$ 111 U.S. dollars) was launched for informal and low-income workers. This aid was originally designed to last for three months and due to societal pressures, it was extended but at a lower value. In the last trimester of 2020, Brazil had an official unemployment rate of 13.9 – the highest since 2012<sup>[9]</sup>. Economists estimate that it can grow further and reach some 16%<sup>[10]</sup>.

The Brazilian tragedy has several components. Neoliberalism, authoritarianism, lacking political leadership, rejection of science and an open contempt for life undergird the absence of adequate responses to the effects of the pandemic. Sanitary and economic insecurities are experienced in a context in which attacks on democracy are carried out more often and more openly.

## Notes

(\*) This article was previously published in Portuguese in the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* (July 3rd, 2020) and in Miriam P. Grossi and Rodrigo Toniol (Eds), “*Cientistas Sociais e o Coronavírus*,” Anpocs, 2020, 230-233.

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*This publication was produced at no cost to the taxpayers of the state of Oklahoma. The University of Oklahoma is an equal opportunity institution. www.ou.edu/eoo.*