

The management of the coronavirus pandemic in Brazil and necropolitics: An essay on an announced tragedy

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By

In recent years, we have seen cuts in budgets for health, education and social security in Brazil. On the other hand, we have also seen an increase in working time and social security taxes, an added precarity of labor relations, and a weakening of workers' unions. Although higher education remains public and free of charge, resources have been reduced and scholarships for supporting postgraduates and students with social needs as well as other services have been threatened, research is compromised, and working conditions are hampered. Universal access to healthcare still exists through the National Health System, but people die waiting for examinations or surgeries that never happen. We are rapidly witnessing the official authorization of alarming quantities of pesticides banned in several other countries. So, when the population is not shot and killed, they are left to die poisoned, in traffic accidents, of starvation, lack of health treatment, ignorance or without possibilities of social mobility.

In our country, necropolitics has operated in parallel with the denial of science and of the social and ethical values consolidated as human rights: an undercutting of efforts to promote equality in gender relations; a lack of respect for traditional indigenous, black and *quilombolas* communities^[1]; contempt for education, science in general and social sciences in particular. The ideology propagated by the current government is based on religious fanaticism, conservatism, and militarization. This is abetted by the questioning of the role and validity of the press, and a growing discourse of violence, as exemplified by the liberalization of weapons control, followed by a tacit authorization by the police force to kill. All of this threatens and intimidates those who are not aligned with perverse thinking and ideological conservatism.

The purpose of this line of argument is to advance some reflections on necropolitics and crisis management of Covid-19 in Brazil. The objective is to demonstrate that the management of the pandemic should be understood within a broader framework of the functioning of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, in which it is not enough to control bodies and manage their conduct, but more properly, to decide on those who should

live or and who should be left to die.

Since the 2000s, scholars such as Achille Mbembe have taken up Foucault's concepts of biopolitics and biopower, seeking to adapt them to understand how the consequences of contemporary state policies produce "worlds of death". Necropolitics is related to contemporary forms that subjugate life to the power of death, performing a profound reconfiguration in the relationships of resistance, sacrifice, and terror in contemporary societies (Mbembe, 2003; Mbembe, 2016). Critical scholars of neoliberalism recognize the system as incompatible with the fight against inequality; on the other hand, inequality, in neoliberalism, would be seen see inequality as a positive value. Neoliberal policies would be policies of death, either by the action of the police force or because they let those who are not "useful" to the system to die due to austerity policies, in the name of the supposed good functioning of the economy. The most vulnerable are allowed to die or kill themselves. Bodies that are not profitable, those who neither produce nor consume, must die.

During the crisis caused by the coronavirus in Brazil, the most vulnerable – the homeless or slums residents – are cut adrift completely from official speeches. They ask themselves how to wash their hands if there is no water available. They wonder how to carry out "social isolation" in small dwellings where more than ten people share the space without other alternatives. The rapid and silent spread of the pandemic in Brazil, euphemistically called "*gripezinha*" (little flu) by the president, alarms experts who understand the seriousness of the situation.

The tension increases daily. There are suspicions that cases of illness and deaths are being underreported. The democratic regime, already battered, is under extreme pressure. Public demonstrations against social isolation measures, crowding the streets of various Brazilian cities, have become a sad portrait of a divided country. Some cities like Manaus are currently witnessing the collapse of the hospital and funeral systems, and the images spread by the press generate a lot of concern in the population. At this moment, Brazil has reached nearly than 18,000 officially registered deaths and *The Lancet* has recently published an editorial harshly criticizing the leadership for its crisis management at the highest level of government in Brazil (Lancet, 2020).

The actions and the omissions of the federal government, especially the pronouncements of the current president, who is widely ridiculed by the international press, could be understood as part of a broader perverse policy of letting the poorest and most vulnerable die – the elderly, those who are not considered useful or productive, and so on. This policy of death will leave a profound mark in our country, aggravating the

situation for those who, facing the current political and economic crises, are already relegated to a condition of the “living dead.”

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Notes

^[1] Quilombolas are the current inhabitants of black rural communities formed by descendants of enslaved Africans, who mostly live on subsistence agriculture on land donated, purchased or occupied for a long time.

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