

Give Your Life to the Economy: Death Management and Neoliberalism in the Brazil of the Pandemic – A Secondary Publication

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Abstract: This essay is a reflection on how the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has re-edited and updated the old mechanisms of neoliberalism and the management of death in Brazil. We discussed the imperatives and messages repeated since March 2020 in the media that transmit a false idea of freedom of choice concerning individual protection, while the State, reinforcing the neoliberal ideology and producing feelings of failure, guilt, and fear materially leaves a large part of the population unprotected. Then, we articulated notions about neoliberalism and the lack of social protection on how death management has been conducted during the pandemic. Finally, we reflected on the possibility of weather insurgency and promoted the idea that the established solidarity networks are expressions of solidarity and class identity based on what resembles us as humans.

Keywords: Pandemic; COVID-19; Death management; Neoliberalism

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1. Introduction

This essay is a reflection on how the pandemic of the new coronavirus (COVID-19) reissued and updated the old mechanisms of neoliberalism and the management of death in the Brazilian context. It was the reflection of two women who, from the different places they occupied, were not mere spectators of social horror but experienced fears daily, exhaustion, attempts at self-management, and the desire to resist. In a way, it is an opportunity to transform anguish into text, share it, find connections, attribute meanings, and discover attempts while trying to build a common ground.

However, the text is not a diatribe. We based our analysis on the empirical aspects of everyday life, on the strata of real life, and on the theoretical connections that each one of us, from our respective areas of study, has been establishing. Thus, we weaved an analysis and sought to understand how neoliberalism, as a social-relational neoliberalism, a device of social relations, orients the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Issues on

replacing the policy of control and death, solutions, and the possibilities of resistance were also explored.

Here, we consider that the global COVID-19 pandemic is not over. Undoubtedly, mass vaccination represents a major step forward in curbing circulation, disease, and deaths caused by the virus. However, the possibilities for vaccination remain unequal, either due to differences in conditions or due to the alienation from the denial of science, a widespread phenomenon by conservative neoliberal governments such as that of Bolsonaro in Brazil. Therefore, in this essay, we will sometimes deal with questions related to the conjugation of the verb in the past tense and other times in the present tense.

Neoliberal rationality is based on the principles of individual focus and competitiveness, as opposed to a State that acts primarily to save national economies rather than protecting people's lives. Thus, it acts in the management of life and death, with various technological scans that allow us to decide which lives should be protected and which should not. We hope to contribute with provocations that shift us away from places of indifference and trivialization of death, while also visualizing possibilities for insurgent struggle and hope.

2. Discourses and devices in the scenario of the Brazilian pandemic

“Stay home. If you can, stay home. Wear a mask. Avoid crowds. Avoid public transportation. Take care of yourself. Take advantage of free time to do what you didn't have time for.” These were some of the messages we hear/read multiple times every day, in Brazil as of March 2020. Those able to meet the expectations imposed by these messages began to feel privileged. A sort of moral guilt emerged in the face of social neglect and the ongoing risk to which most of the population was still exposed.

The first case of death from COVID-19 in Brazil was that of a domestic worker in Rio de Janeiro. Her employer had returned from a trip to Italy and had not dismissed her from work. However, recently, the Domestic Employees Union of Bahia announced that so far (April 2021), they have received 28 requests for help from women under house arrest in their employer's homes and subjected to slave-like work.

The issue also gained visibility after a live show with Regina Casé. Daniel Cady (known for being the husband of singer Ivete Sangalo) blamed the housemaid for having transmitted the coronavirus to the family ^[1]. Daniel's story was indicative of a logic that views individuals with subaltern jobs, such as domestic workers, mostly black women, as needing to be incarcerated. Otherwise, they are seen as a danger, jeopardizing the safety of the white bourgeoisie. Nonetheless, they can choose between staying with their bosses or losing their jobs. With the development of internet access and the possibility to move between cities, domestic workers can move away in a relatively safe way.

These are just a few examples that present individualization and control as conservative neoliberal regulatory devices, which permeate the social relationship as a whole. We come to believe that they are inherent to our way of life, without questioning why we think and feel the way we do. Harvey pointed out that, for a system of thought to become hegemonic, the enunciation of the fundamental concepts must be so deeply rooted in common sense as to be taken for granted and unquestioned. This excludes old concepts. It is necessary to build a conceptual apparatus that seems almost 'natural' to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and desires, as well as to the possibilities that seem embedded in the social world we inhabit ^[8].

For neoliberalism, these concepts revolve around individual rights and freedoms ^[8]. According to Rolnik, the politics of subjectivation change depending on the installation of any regime. However, in the specific case of neoliberalism, the subjectification acquires centrality in social regulation ^[16]. It is the very principle that governs capitalism in its contemporary version. The author also noted that the so-called “cognitive capitalism” takes advantage of the wounds of totalitarianism in countries like Brazil, with marks from the period of military dictatorship.

Freedom without rights and social security produces a false sense that we can all, to some extent, make choices. We can take care of ourselves even if we do not have access to adequate masks, food, and income. Even if children and students cannot attend classes because of the pandemic, they can take advantage of their free time to read books or take online learning courses. Meanwhile, working women are increasingly overburdened with work, being tasked with the complete management of private life within the household, including caring for their children and the elderly. In the same wake, women are among those who lost the most work and income during the pandemic.

The narrative of freedom, without the existence of real possibilities of choice on the part of the population, only contributes to the individualization of all the structural issues. In other words, the processes of individual blame and accountability are replaced, making us feel and perceive what happens as purely individual. These basic principles of neoliberalism are articulated as a regime of truth based on free competition and profit, taking on new clothes during the pandemic, and regulating social relations^[3]. The individualization of how we perceive the precariousness of life makes it difficult to see it from the perspective of its structural complexity and the responsibility of governments and States. This hinders broader articulations to claim prevention and health care as a right.

The production of social fear and false freedom segment the feeling of impossibility of any way out. Souza, in discussing the irrational reasons for fascism in Brazil that culminated in the election of Jair Bolsonaro for president, explained that fascism gathers resentments, fears, and anxieties that cannot be explained from above and channels them as scapegoats. The sentiment once spread by the mainstream press against the Workers' Party as a den of corruption was the most obvious. What the poor would need to know is why they became poorer. Otherwise, pure anger and frustration would be poured out, as it inevitably was, inevitably onto the first socially legitimized scapegoat^[17].

There is a long story to tell to demonstrate how such questions arise, but that is beyond the limits of this text. However, we cannot overlook the historicity of this process. The tactics of control, isolation, and individual responsibility have already been used as a state response strategy to other epidemics, as in the case of AIDS. In the 1980s, when the first cases of AIDS appeared, the disease was associated with a "gay plague" (or gay cancer), a kind of punishment for promiscuity. The initial scientific-state response was the prohibition of sex and the closure of spaces for sexual encounters, such as saunas, fear-based education, and reinforcement of guilt.

However, there are also significant differences in the new context. In February 2021, the mayor of Porto Alegre's literal speech was "contribute your life to the economy." His outrageous assertion explicitly reveals the tension that has always been present between the maintenance of capitalism, the confrontation of its crises, and collective public health. This is not a new tension, as it often appears as such whenever a new episode occurs. The feeling of "now" and the difficulty of observing the historicity of social processes is also a hallmark of a fragmented neoliberal society. However, recently, this tension was already latent. For example, in the dispute over the approval of PEC 55 (on the ceiling of public spending on social policies), living one's life to save the economy from the crisis is a perverse appeal. However, in the social history of capitalism, we can observe that the mode of production is appropriating different strategies to summon and/or compel the general population to contribute their lives to the economy. Mascaro emphasized that this was not a neoliberal crisis, but a structural crisis of the capital^[11].

According to Mascaro, the Brazilian response to the health and economic crisis, managed by the government of Jair Bolsonaro, was based on investing in the crisis as a reaction to the crisis. To do this, they rely on three pillars: denialism and the discrediting of science; opposition to reality as a political strategy: "opposition to the very reality over which they govern, reducing the cost of politicians and their responsibilities, making use of their captive audiences of the extreme right and anti-scientific discourses and thoughts"^[11].

Third, the economic strategy, where the investment in saving the financial sector is to the detriment of public health and the material survival of the population. These three pillars fuel a cultural and ideological brew that is incorporated into our daily lives. According to Heller, everyday life, as a site of reproduction, is the life of the “complete human being,” the terrain of uncritical thought and overgeneralization^[9]. In everyday life, neoliberal ideology becomes our very own body, shaping our movements, language, and actions. The narratives presented in this text showed that even though neoliberalism failed economically, it won ideologically.

3. Management of death: social lack of protection and individual hyper-responsibility

For Dardot and Laval, neoliberalism rests on the realization that capitalism has inaugurated a period of permanent revolution in the economy and social order^[4]. However, there is no spontaneous adaptation by individuals. Therefore, a policy aimed at individual and social life as a whole was needed. This government can determine and regulate individual behavior and, through these government tactics, determine acceptable or forbidden behavior. The subject looks at himself and looks at the other. It was stated that an individual is considered a “potential criminal”, being an individual that was governed by their self-interest. In the age of the internet, especially in the pandemic, those who have access to the internet can maximize communication, where virtual interaction becomes the realm of social interaction. With this, hypervigilance of one’s self and others occurs as the ultimate bodily regulation.

These discourses indicate an individual’s hyper-responsibility by proposing the management of the health crisis from individual imperatives, suggesting that each person is responsible for their survival and care. These discourses construct a reality where strategies are based on risk populations. Hence, it is necessary to protect the elderly who are included in the risk group, creating a false sense of protection for those who are not in the risk group, while exempting the State from the responsibility of protecting everyone. Additionally, high-risk groups are singled out. If in the early actions against AIDS existed an outcry against unprotected sex, age risk is of concern in the new era.

The State uses sovereign power to control the population, exercising management of life through a death policy. Mbembe presented a theoretical construction to the understanding of this sovereign power by coining necropolitics, which deals with contemporary forms of the subjection of life to the power of death and thus profoundly reconfiguring the relations between resistance, sacrifice, and terror. It was no longer a matter of deciding who lives or who dies, but how they do so^[14].

The current situation expresses that, on a day-to-day basis, the power of death in the sense of granting to subjects a place of “living dead”^[12]. The power is configured in denialist speeches about the severity of the pandemic, boycotts of vaccination, delaying purchases or loss of vaccination stocks, as reported by several Brazilian media. Brazilian media, the headline of Portal EXAME said: “Government lets tests and vaccines expire; a stock of 80 million reais will be incinerated,” in a cascade of public policy resources and direct actions through judicial evictions or police operations^[15]. Not only was it expressed by the lives taken but also by the lives interrupted by silence in the face of the horror we are experiencing.

Silence feeds terror. According to Mbembe, governing based on terror no longer concerns repressing and discipline, but above all killing, whether in mass or contained doses. War no longer necessarily pits armies and sovereign states against each other^[14]. The regulation of populations implies wars that are increasingly tantamount to the appropriation of economic resources. In the context of a global pandemic, healthcare supplies and marketed vaccines are also economic resources.

When faced with this regulation of sovereign power by death, resistance is widespread and seems to be

non-existent, but it exists in frighteningly large numbers. We learned from Davis that it was critical to resist the representation of history as the work of heroic individuals for people today to recognize their potential as part of an ever-expanding community of struggle. As a community, protagonism is mobile and everchanging between groups and forces, with a greater or lesser possibility of struggle, while continuously promoting resistance. While the State uses sovereign power for life or death, the combative and insurgent force of the working class operates daily in defense of life. It is the collectivized subjects who create the conditions for the expansion of life and total insubordination to this necropower of the State.

4. The control of subjectivity and the (in)possibilities of insurgency

As we have seen throughout this text, with the ideological reign of neoliberalism in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, everything comes to be perceived as an individual experience, mediated by the production of discourses that oscillate between the absolute terror of thousands of deaths worldwide and the denial of the pandemic. In other words, the narratives of a deadly virus that spreads through the air cohabit (or cohabitated) requiring isolation and confinement, i.e., total shutdown, suspension of commerce, travel, collective relations, large gatherings, and the narrative that everyone had better expose themselves to the virus in pursuit of fallacious herd immunity. To rephrase, it was part of the neoliberal logic to “transform reality into fiction and fiction into reality”^[14].

Narratives that purport to report on the extent and severity of the pandemic can be used as images/discourses that serve to reduce panic. Butler, on the wars produced by the United States, stated that there was a production of a visual spectacle that numbs the senses and, like the sublime itself, would sideline the ability to think^[2].

We can correlate this reflection to the pandemic in Brazil, where images of burials in mass graves and the lack of oxygen result in sadness, panic, and numbness, but, at the same time, naturalize suffering and anesthetize senses. Isolation further amplifies this numbness. With the isolation of bodies and communication regulated by distance and the virtual environment, the possibility of exchanging meanings for the construction of commonality becomes a concern. As stated by Dardot and Laval, the suffering caused by this neo-liberal subjectivation, the mutilation that operates in common life, at work and outside of it, is such that we cannot exclude the possibility of a neoliberal anti-revolt of great magnitude in many countries^[4]. We should not ignore the subjective mutations provoked by neoliberalism that operate in the sense of social selfishness, denial of solidarity, and redistribution. All these may lead to a broad confrontation between opposing logic and adverse forces on a global scale that are on the rise^[2].

While the Bolsonarist right wing carries out acts in favor of freedom of movement and the opening of markets, the channels of vindication, struggle, and resistance for rights and security have been removed, either by the institutional order itself or by the rupture with the commons. How can we, today, rebuild possibilities of collectivization? According to Harvey, the sustained incoherent capitalist policies in the past were a wide range of struggles of the exploited and dispossessed, of workers against capitalists, of citizens against rentiers and predatory merchants, of entire populations against the violence of extractive colonialism and imperialism, in addition to the more vague but no less influential struggles for justice, rights and a more democratic ethic of social order^[8].

However, even in the wake of the author’s reflection, the “enigma” of capitalism today, in its neoliberal face, hinders its understanding and cohesive articulation for the construction of an alternative project. What institutions can emerge in these times to save capital from itself or to articulate the possibility of alternative projects? For Harvey, the internalization of the hidden imperatives of capitalism, regardless of our ethical inclinations, was the dominant praxis. This included all the subtleties of the political subjectivities it

implements, against which we must constructively rebel if we want to change the world fundamentally ^[8].

According to Flores, there is only one kind of rights for all: human rights. Freedom and equality are two sides of the same coin and one without the other is nothing ^[7]. The author also asked: What are the goods that the rights must guarantee? What are the material conditions necessary to demand them? What is the role of social struggles in their conception and consolidation? In this pandemic context of accentuated contradictions and precariousness of life, there is a generalized feeling of dread. False freedom, without equality, produces guilt and individual responsibility. This resurgence at such a difficult moment in human history calls for people's lives in the name of competition and profit. Even mourning, typically seen in Western culture as a moment of sharing and a policy of memory, becomes a solitary experience.

Even when considering the parallels between the response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and COVID-19 on bereavement, there seems to be an important difference. AIDS deaths were perceived from a community point of view, especially the LGBT community collectively elaborated grief, transforming it into resistance. Mourning and the denial of death as destiny sustained the struggles for drugs and demands against the State and the pharmaceutical industry. Meetings in LGBT socialization spaces, especially for transvestites, transsexuals, and gay men, as well as sex workers and people who use drugs; denying death as a designation and the search for disruption with prevention policies based on control gave rise to unprecedented measures of prevention, self-care, and resistance to the system.

In the current pandemic in Brazil, there is a concern of building denial and resistance to death as a destiny, especially for the working and impoverished strata of society. It seems that clues can be found in community strategies based on solidarity and in what is similar to us as humans. According to Butler, there is no "universally shared human condition" as the universal human being is a category created by the Enlightenment, which erases different conditions of existence and hierarchizes lives by colonialism ^[2]. Not only is this enviable but tolerable. Furthermore, mourning as a human experience brings us closer. In the global pandemic, the lives taken have brought additional pain, the impossibility of farewell rituals, with funerals, where people gather for a last goodbye. However, this was not possible for COVID-19 victims, where Health protocols require brief funerals with a small number of people. At the time, only burials were allowed or the death was broadcasted online.

Staying at home for a long period can generate fear and the impossibility of coexistence. It also exerts imperatives on people to manage their care in the face of imminent contamination, as if it were possible to stay at home without income and security, and also as if the end of the pandemic depended only on individual decisions. In addition, it is necessary to balance fear and the desire to be close to loved ones, amidst the anguish and guilt of the collective discourse that criminalizes individual behavior and not the deliberate inability of the government to control the pandemic and mitigate its effects on social life. It is the discursive terror and control of people that is part of necropolitics.

Not only is "Necro" in the cession of life but in the control over the production of life, which extends through the control of the discourses circulated that can escape from the margins, from acceptable or execrable behaviors. Information is blurred, and even health guidelines are transmitted with a classist and racist filter. Spectacles with all protocols were allowed in upscale neighborhoods and groups of young people were dispersed in the outskirts with stun bombs.

The pandemic does not put us all in the same boat. On the contrary, it increases the gap between racial and social inequality. According to Fanon, it was the gap between humans (zone of being) and those not considered as human (zone of non-being) ^[8]. It is a concept that helps explain how the modern European colonial project organized and hierarchized intersubjective relations, the ways of relating among subjects, their relationships, the production of knowledge, and social and institutional recognition that mark the coloniality of power,

knowledge, and living.

This enterprise used race to carry out this colonial project, first through slavery and then through persistent coloniality, which continues to this day, especially in countries like Brazil, where racism structures society, along with sexism and classicism in a cross matrix of oppressions. Colonization hierarchized lives by creating races, determining a superiority between whites and non-whites, human and non-human beings, where black people are categorized as non-human beings.

It is in this context that many people feel called to forge possibilities of presence amidst distancing, solidarity, and collective construction, as a life commitment amid the looming death that lurks, a defiance of silence imposition. This is to build new rituals of struggle, without denying pain and chaos, to remember those affected by the pandemic. Confluent movements that produce genuine solidarity, not Christian charity, fear of punishment and loaded with superiority, but solidarity that recognizes in the other part of itself, that provides sustenance in times of food insecurity because it understands the importance of this act for itself. We can think that the innumerable actions of food security feasibility are carried out by workers for workers, that is, class identity and solidarity. Networks of solidarity and community protection developed especially by women of the periphery are able to affirm the life of the other.

Peripheral communities have organized themselves to demand from the government conditions to face the pandemic, forging part of these conditions by activating the ancestral knowledge of resistance that guarantees their life despite the necropolitics. We do not point to such a statement to legitimize this process, on the contrary, in doing so we seek to break through the barrier of the unspeakable that prevails. These include the absence of universal humanity, unfair conditions within the working class, dissidence, and polyphony, and it is from them that the common is built. The commons creates strategies to guarantee food security by forging the struggle for food sovereignty. Besides that, strategies for health promotion with popular health promoters can be built, while at the same time investing political strength for a more equitable health system.

5. Final considerations

In this text, we went through narratives and discourses constructed on the pandemic that reenacted the neoliberal rationality from the management of death. We seek to demonstrate through parallels with the AIDS epidemic and theoretical connections that, although the global pandemic situation is unprecedented, the Brazilian response to the pandemic has historical roots. As Marx once said, history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce ^[10].

The tragic moment seems to repeat itself. The mechanisms of individual responsibility and insecurity reenact the politics of death: to kill and let die those whose bodies do not produce commotion. Between addressing the collective health situation or saving the economy, the choice of our imperial colonialist governance is clear: surrender life to the pandemic. Not all lives, but those that are disposable, those that are not worth mourning; those that are too old, too black, or occupy socially designated places that, if you die, there is a reserve army to replace them.

The challenge of this text was, in a way, to broaden the perception of the processes that are experienced as merely individuals. These processes are social, historical, and permeated with contradictions. To find a collective way out, we need to elucidate the mechanisms of neo-liberal subjectivation and the management of death that correspond to the expectation of capitalist accumulation. We need to understand how the neo-liberal machinery of death carries a colonial gear to mark some bodies as disposable.

But if the machinery of death management advances, the mechanisms of struggle of the working class

are reinvented. It is from the margins of capital that resistances are forged daily, not only existence using inventiveness, creativity, and solidarity for everyday “struggle.” This is because it is in the collectivity making it possible to forge mechanisms to confront the destructive machinery of capital in neoliberal times. The pandemic may have taught us, finally, that the working class is not a monolithic bloc, and there are differences in how we experience being a worker. On the contrary, the identities that constitute and situate us in the world do not weaken our capacity for class struggle, but broaden our arsenal of struggle. If the peripheries of Brazil are teaching us how to manage crises, guarantee better living conditions, and, above all, resist the neoliberal management of death, it is enough that we know how to learn from history. As inspired by Conceição Evaristo, “We agree not to die.”

Disclosure statement

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