



Biopolitics and (in)security in Foucault: elements for a diagnosis of the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil

*Biopolítica e (in)segurança em Foucault: elementos
para um diagnóstico da gestão da pandemia de
COVID-19 no Brasil*

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Abstract

Faced with the criticism of the biopolitical control exercised in the COVID-19 pandemic, we defend the importance of a re-examination of the Foucauldian reflections so that the critical diagnoses of the present is accompanied by a careful analysis of the fields of force and knowledge in which such controls occur. Bearing in mind the correlation between security mechanisms and the management of insecurities, we argue that in the management of the pandemic by the Brazilian executive government, the excesses of power took place more due to the lack of imposing restrictive health measures and obstacles to the control of contagion than through restrictive actions of classical individual freedoms.

Keywords: Foucault. Biopolitics. Mechanisms of security. Pandemics. Brazilian government.

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Resumo

Diante das críticas ao controle biopolítico exercido na pandemia de COVID-19, defendemos a importância de um reexame das reflexões foucaultianas para que os diagnósticos críticos do presente sejam acompanhados de uma análise cuidadosa dos campos de força e de saberes nos quais tais controles ocorrerem. Atentando à correlação entre os mecanismos de segurança e a gestão de inseguranças, argumentamos que na gestão da pandemia pelo governo executivo brasileiro os excessos de poder se efetivaram antes pela falta de impor medidas sanitárias restritivas e pelos entraves ao controle do contágio do que por ações restritivas das liberdades individuais.

Palavras-chave: Foucault. Biopolítica. Dispositivos de segurança. Pandemia. Governo brasileiro.

Introduction

The beginning of the covid-19 pandemic, caused by the SARS-COV-2 virus provoked a series of reactions in the intellectual field of the humanities. Concepts from various thinkers were mobilized providing a basis for understanding what was going on. Without going into the merits of specific readings, we would like to raise a point in common to some of them, which provoked the first impulse for the writing of this article: there was a quick criticism of the control of the movement of people without making this criticism a result from a careful analysis of the field of forces and knowledge at stake. For this reason, in our view, Foucauldian reflections around the concept of biopolitics need to be revisited in a more detailed way to verify how they can still contribute to a diagnosis of the present. Furthermore, we need to question the necessary adjustments to understand the current phenomenon of the resurgence of a permissive political rationality to the attitude of denying the existence and severity of global systemic problems, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis. A similar negationism on a planetary scale is also valid for the Brazilian case. Certainly, neither this current phenomenon nor the reality of colonially formed countries are major objects of Foucauldian research. However, even so, we intend to show how these researches are significantly up-to-date, especially if we add the modulation of security technologies together with biopolitics.

The concept of biopolitics, which appeared for the first time in a conference that Foucault gave in Brazil in 1974, is further explored in the last chapter of *History of sexuality Vol I*, and in the last class of *Society must be defended*. Although its presence gradually diminished in 1978 and 1979, the types of problems evoked by biopolitics cross the courses *Security, territory, population* and *The birth of biopolitics*, since the analyzes of these courses turn to the way in which the population in its vital phenomena constitutes the object of political actions.

The elasticity of the concept of biopolitics

If we take as a basis *History of sexuality Vol I* and *Society must be defended*, we will find the main direct mentions of the concept of biopolitics. In this article, instead of exploring all facets of this form of power, we will highlight some of the characteristics responsible for keeping it current. First, it is necessary to remember that the descriptions of biopolitics are made by Foucault in order to differentiate it from other forms of power, notably sovereignty. Sovereign power is characteristic of societies marked by the power of confiscation, so that its maximum expression is the confiscation of the subject's lives. Since the end of the 18th century and especially since the 19th century, a new form of power has gradually emerged, whose rationality is different. To the extent that the incitement of forces, the control of bodies and even birth and mortality became objects of power, mechanisms that function in the sense of managing life are constituted:

This death that was based on the right of the sovereign is now manifested as simply the reverse of the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life [...]. The old power of death that symbolized sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life (FOUCAULT, 1978, p.136; 139-140).

However, it is precisely from the moment that political power aims to manage life in order to increase its potentials, that death can also be produced on an industrial scale, a logic that runs through wars, genocides, colonization and the phenomenon of concentration camps:

Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital. It is as managers of life and survival, of bodies-and the race, that so many regimes have been able to wage so many wars,

causing so many men to be killed. And through a turn that closes the circle, as the technology of wars has caused them to tend increasingly toward all-out destruction, the decision that initiates them and the one that terminates them are in fact increasingly informed by the naked question of survival (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 137).

According to Foucault, it is racism that will operate the cut between making live and letting die. In his examples, Foucault deals with the biological type of racism that developed with the transpositions of Darwin's theories to the understanding of relations between populations. However, the elasticity of the concept of biopolitics seems to overcome the barriers of biological racism and its ideas such as the hierarchy of races, survival of the superior race, the dangers of degeneration, etc. Foucault makes this concept elastic enough to allow the insertion of other forms of racism and segregation, which is indicated by two positions. Firstly, the mention of biological warfare and atomic warfare in the lecture of March 17, 1976, although quick, in no way seems to presuppose its foundation in a biological type of racism (FOUCAULT, 2003, p. 253-254). Secondly and more importantly, the conception of state racism also opens the way for other segregations besides biological racism to operate the biopolitical cut that separates making live and letting die. In this case, Foucault makes a useful statement for our present time:

When I say 'killing,' I obviously do not mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on (FOUCAULT, 2003, p. 253).

According to Foucault's words, it is not only and necessarily a question of killing with meticulous and optimized planning, but of letting die, for example, exposing a portion of the population to much greater risks than another portion. We have then an initial elasticity of the concept of biopolitics, which ranges from efforts to increase longevity and reduce the incidence of diseases, but also the promotion of massacres, genocide, or even the exposure of parts of a population to more risks. In this sense, we can ask if extreme phenomena such as Nazism lead us to suppose whether, in these cases, the logic of biopower would not be rather *a making to live* and *making to die*; but also, by including the increased risk of death for a portion of the population, this more elastic definition of the murderous function of biopolitics seems to indicate a good way to approach the management of the pandemic in Brazil, since the logic of making live and letting die seems very suitable for this case.

Furthermore, this scope of the concept of biopolitics, which encompasses from Nazism to colonialism, but also campaigns around birth and mortality, seems to have led Foucault to dedicate himself to the technologies of security in 1978 in *Security, territory, population*. These technologies of security can help to further update the concept of biopolitics in order to explore its nuances, since they are born together with liberalism and are still current to a certain extent.

Technologies of security and creating insecurity

In the course *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault outlines some specificities of the mechanisms that act in the regulation of population phenomena, henceforth called technologies of security. These technologies are analyzed in the context of the emergence of liberalism in the 18th century with the physiocrats, with the specificity of liberalism not being considered an economic theory, nor an ideology. Foucault considers liberalism as a social technology for conducting conduct. Due to the scope of this writing, we will focus on just a few characteristics of security mechanisms, especially the action on the milieu of a population and securitary normalization.

Security mechanisms affect and create a specific form of subject. We no longer deal with subjects of right and their wills, as in the case of sovereignty. Nor does one deal with organisms that one wants to train in order to attach them to a production apparatus. Although adapting to a productive apparatus is also an important objective for security mechanisms, their action plan takes place at another level. Security mechanisms invest in a population that exists and acts in a milieu: “I mean a multiplicity of individuals who are and fundamentally and essentially only exist biologically bound to the materiality within which they live” (FOUCAULT, 2007, p. 37).

Therefore, security mechanisms act in this milieu, which is the environment of action of a population that, in turn, is affected by quasi-natural events, such as epidemics, unemployment, accidents, aging, birth, mortality. Thus, instead of acting on a watertight territory, such as sovereignty, and instead of directly affecting the bodies of individuals, such as disciplines, security mechanisms act on the milieu in which a population acts. It is also worth noting that this notion of “milieu”

encompasses a physical and biological dimension, but also encompasses human artifices, since exchange, work and property relations also constitute this means on which security devices act. It is by acting on this medium, and not directly on the population, that it will be led by these devices.

In the class of January 25, 1978, Foucault summarizes the difference in the relationship with the norm in sovereignty, disciplinary, and security. Initially, it is necessary to differentiate the security normalization from the legal norm. Through Kelsen, Foucault shows that every legal system refers to a set of norms that are presupposed or suprapositive, in order to avoid the infinite regress to which we would be led if every right had to be based on another right. In this sense, for Kelsen, legal law would be a way of codifying these presupposed norms, separating the permitted from the prohibited. Disciplinary regulation and security normalization act differently.

Disciplinary normation act in order to decompose spaces, individuals, their gestures and the time of elaboration of gestures. This decoupage is carried out to pursue specific objectives, such as carrying out a military operation, learning something, operating a machine, and, for that, coordinate sequences that are established to achieve such objectives; as a result, to achieve goals correctly it is also necessary to require a series of exercises, forms of dressage and training. Therefore, for Foucault, in the discipline there is a primacy of the normative model, or “the primacy of the norm in relation to the normal” or a movement “that disciplinary normalization goes from the norm to the final division between the normal and the abnormal” (FOUCAULT, 2007, p. 85). The discipline establishes a normative model in advance and will seek the means to make people and gestures conform to this model – therefore, the norm is first. But this relationship to the norm differs in the case of security, which is why Foucault separates disciplinary normation from security normalization.

The main example for dealing with normalization in security mechanisms is the case of the smallpox epidemic in the 18th century. In this case, the statistic, which was born around the same time, pointed to a mortality rate of 1 to 7,782 – that is, something around 12.85% in London. As it is a disease with very intense outbreaks and high mortality, this led to the experimentation of exotic medical practices for the period. These practices are variolization (or inoculation with smallpox) in the 18th

century, and the Jennerian vaccination in the early 19th century (with cowpox, much less lethal and with less risk of transmitting other diseases). What draws Foucault's attention in these cases is the discrepancy between medical theory and clinical practice. Until then, there were basically two theories that explained illness at that time: the theme of contagion (one person transmits the disease, thought of as an entity, to another), or of infection (environmental conditions such as swamps in which there was putrefaction of things/degeneration of matter led to the emergence of diseases; it is here that we find the theory of miasmas). In addition to not admitting the existence of microorganisms, none of these theories predicted the possibility of preventing serious forms of diseases, such as smallpox, through the act of causing a less serious version of the same disease. Therefore, although they had a high degree of success, practices such as variolization were purely empirical, without any real explanation on the part of the medical theories of the time. It is only with Pasteur at the end of the 19th century, with the improvement of microscopes and later with the birth of immunology and infectiology, that we will know how and why these rudimentary vaccination practices worked. Until then it was only known that they worked, not how they worked.

But these practices became acceptable to what Foucault calls “medical police” – which is not medicine exactly, but the set of medical-administrative institutions that were committed to regulating the life of the population of a territory – for two kinds reasons. First, these practices were accepted and disseminated even without theoretical foundations due to the mathematical-statistical support that justified them¹. Second, these practices became acceptable once they developed according to the same rationality as other security mechanisms that already existed. And this rationality consists of the following: instead of trying to prevent an undesirable phenomenon (as disciplinary devices did), security devices aim to “instead of trying to prevent it, making other elements of reality function in relation to it in such a way that the phenomenon is cancelled out, as it were” (FOUCAULT, 2007, p. 87). It is in this sense that it becomes acceptable to provoke the smallpox itself in a less intense way in individuals so that the disease does not reach them in an intense way, even

¹ On this subject, see the second note of the page, from the class on January 25, 1978 (FOUCAULT, 2007, p. 87).

when it is not known why and how this happened. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the security action through variolization has the peculiarity of acting directly on people's bodies, which would seem to put it in contradiction with the definition of action on the milieu. However, this action on the body was aimed precisely to act on the milieu. It is due to the devastating effects of smallpox on the workforce and on the economy in general, due to the risks it generated in this environment with its very high fatality rate, that a direct action on people's bodies is justified. Therefore, one acts on the body in the most direct and intimate way possible, but with the aim of acting on the milieu and making mortality rates return to the levels of when there were no smallpox outbreaks.

We still need to add the economic dimension of security technologies, since they act on a simultaneously natural and artificial environment. In this sense, the direction of economic flows is also part of the government² of the populations. In the class of January 25, 1978, Foucault will say that, in these security technologies:

if one wants to encourage population, or achieve the right relationship between the population and the state's resources and possibilities, then one must act on a range of factors and elements that seem far removed from the population itself and its immediate behavior, fecundity, and desire to reproduce. For example, one must act on the currency flows that irrigate the country, knowing their directions and whether they really reach all the elements of the population or leave some regions inert (FOUCAULT, 2007, p. 100).

Therefore, problems that still remain current, such as where capital flows pass, the functions of taxes, who pays more or who pays less taxes are also covered by the

² The use of the term government in our article has two distinct meanings depending on the context. When we mention the Brazilian government, we use the word in the sense of administrative law, in which government is synonymous for the executive power and its attributions - between 2019 and 2022 headed by President Jair Messias Bolsonaro (former member of the party PSL and now member of the party PL), and the vice president General Hamilton Mourão (member of the party PRTB). When we mention the Foucauldian meaning of the term government, as in this case, the term refers to the set of social mechanisms and knowledge that are responsible for the conduct of men's conduct, as initially mentioned by Foucault in his lecture on February 1, 1978; this formulation is well described in *The subject and power*, in 1982: "It is a set of actions on possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes it easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, makes more probable or less; in extremes, it constrains or forbids absolutely, but it is always a way of acting upon one or more subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions" (FOUCAULT, 1994, p. 341). Certainly, the government, in the sense of executive power that is a component of the State (together with the legislature and the judiciary), directs part of the technologies of government, in the sense of Foucauldian governmentality. However, it is necessary to emphasize that, for this, it is necessary to mobilize techniques that are born in a context external to the State itself and that spread to a broader field than the State.

security devices. Thus, the production and distribution of wealth will be another field of action of these devices, whose effect will be in the order of conduction of conducts.

Complementing Foucault's analysis, we would like to draw attention to something that Foucault does not mention directly, but which would be a consequence of his analysis: insecurity exists in direct correlation with security mechanisms. Security management implies the production of insecurity, which can be minimized, but also maximized for certain groups, or used for certain purposes, which can be the target of interests or economic calculation. In this case, we agree with Thomas Lemke, when he states:

Liberalism does not only produce freedoms, which are permanently endangered (by their own conditions of production) and require mechanisms of security. Danger and insecurity (the threat of unemployment, poverty, social degradation, etc.) are not only unwanted consequences or negative side-effects but essential conditions and positive elements of liberal freedom. In this sense, liberalism nurtures danger, it subjects danger to an economic calculus, weighing its advantages against its costs (LEMKE, 2016, p. 46).

Therefore, with the production of insecurity in a society marked by security mechanisms, it is not necessary to carry out mass executions and politically persecute the undesirables. For this, it is enough to act in the milieu in order to expose them to greater dangers, it is enough to seek the implementation of laws that allow, for example, at a time of world vaccine shortage during a pandemic, that vaccines are sold first to people or companies that pay for it;³ especially, it is enough to force most of the population to leave home in a pandemic because these people have low income and informal jobs without legal protection or with dilapidated legal protection, it is enough to expose to precarious housing and the lack of basic sanitation, to expose to environmental risks and to ecological imbalances. In this sense, when liberalism becomes a way of conducting conduct, insecurity updates the dimension of “letting die” mentioned above, while security concerns the “making live” of biopolitics, with the exception that one does not exist without the other.

³ This is the case of bill 948/2021, authored by deputy Hildo Rocha (MDB/MA), which would allow private entities to buy vaccines and deduct the purchase value from their income tax – which, in practice, means that the State would be buying vaccines for the private sector since it would give up collection or would need to issue public bonds for that. Available in: https://www.camara.leg.br/proposicoesWeb/prop_mostrarintegra.jsessionid=node01pp7esescdlh47g43jykom9p918704815.node0?codteor=1976390&filename=PL+948/2021. Accessed on: 01/09/2022.

Insecurity and freedom in the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil

To address the management of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Brazilian government, we initially need to make an important caveat about contemporary knowledge. In addition to having freed themselves from biological racism, epidemiology, in particular, has widely admitted and investigated the influence of social factors on the development of epidemics. In this way, a range of criticism is opened up from the articulation between health and social organization problems that range from economic inequality to racism and gender discrimination. It seems to us that in this case there was a mismatch between the criticism of control and the reduction of freedoms, made by some intellectuals at the beginning of the pandemic in relation to sanitary measures, and the weight that most epidemiologists already give to social issues, including excesses of control. However, even for specialists in public health, the initial fear in fact was the possibility that a government with strong authoritarian tendencies could take advantage of the pandemic to expand forms of social control and impede civil liberties, such as the professor at the USP School of Public Health, Deisy Ventura, comments in a conversation with microbiologist and scientific disseminator Átila Iamarino on 03/24/2021⁴.

However, this fear quickly faded as it became increasingly evident that the Brazilian government's strategy manifested a different political calculus. Together with Trump's USA, the Brazilian government led by Jair Bolsonaro bet on the immunization of the population through contagion, assuming the consequences of illness, sequelae and death of the population as an acceptable cost for the rapid recovery of the economy.⁵ Thus, it was up to governors and mayors to implement measures to ensure social distancing, while part of the congress tried to adopt measures that would force the federal government to contain the spread of the virus. By promoting denialism or normalizing deaths, the federal government's stance was to sabotage collective efforts aimed at social distancing and the use of masks. The

⁴ Watch especially from 00:23:00 the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spvxzjMNYbo>. Accessed on: 08/05/2021.

⁵ However, it should be noted that, unlike Bolsonaro, Trump quickly closed agreements for the distribution of vaccines in the US.

rhetorical justification against the mechanisms of containment of COVID-19 was made through the propagation of supposed early treatments (proven ineffective) that gave people only the adverse effects of the drugs (especially chloroquine, hydroxychloroquine, azithromycin and ivermectin), and the minimization of the effects of the disease in statements by the president.

Many elements indicate that it is precisely through a very particular security calculation that the Brazilian government has organized the strategy to face the pandemic in the national territory. This calculation involves maximizing insecurity for the vast majority of the Brazilian population with a view to acquiring a supposed immunity through contagion and illness, which implies avoidable deaths and sequelae for the majority of the population, as well as the risk of emergence of mutations that make the virus more adapted to the human organism. Both statements by the president and members of the government, as well as the analysis of norms issued by the Union, allow us to reach this conclusion. Still in 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, on April 3, when Brazil had 365 official deaths, Bolsonaro says that the virus is like rain, which will wet 70% of Brazilians⁶. The normalizing statement of this fatalism has been made other times, such as on July 7, 2020⁷. This and several other statements in this regard were said and reiterated by the president and members of the Brazilian government⁸. It remains to make the calculation that the president himself seems to have made when he refrained from acting to contain contamination: according to the IBGE, in 2020 Brazil had approximately 211.8 million inhabitants⁹. Considering normal that 70% of this amount will contract the virus, is equivalent to 148.26 million people infected. If we admit the estimate of a fatality rate that is around 0.7%, it is assumed that it would be inevitable that around 1.037.820 people would

⁶ Statement present in the report “Bolsonaro compara vírus a chuva: ‘Vai molhar 70% de vocês’” <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2020/04/03/bolsonaro-compara-coronavirus-rain.htm>. Accessed on: 08/05/2020.

⁷ Statement present in the report: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2020/07/07/e-como-uma-chuva-vai-atingir-voces-diz-bolsonaro-sobre-covid-19.htm>. Accessed on: 08/04/2021.

⁸ Despite the fact that there is extensive knowledge, a recent list of some of them can be seen in the article “251 mil mortes por covid: relembre as falas de Bolsonaro sobre a pandemia” Cf. <https://www.poder360.com.br/1-ano-de-covid-no-brasil/251-mil-mortes-por-covid-relembre-as-falas-de-bolsonaro-about-a-pandemic/>. Accessed on: 08/06/2021.

⁹ Information available at: <https://censos.ibge.gov.br/agencia-noticias/2012-agencia-de-noticias/noticias/28676-ibge-estima-populacao-do-pais-em-211-8-milhoes-de-inhabitantes>. Accessed on: 01/09/2022.

die, not counting the extra deaths caused by overload in the health system, and the emergence of new variants due to the high number of contaminations. The Brazilian government has also lured the Brazilian population to risks of contagion and death through the spread of ineffective preventive treatments,¹⁰ promotion of unfounded mistrust in vaccines, promotion of crowds at events,¹¹ and propaganda against social distancing measures and the use of masks¹².

In contrast to the population's exposure to greater risks of illness and death, also seen with the delay in approving emergency financial aid, there was the help to ensure liquidity in the financial market. In March 2020, aid to the financial market came much faster and with little questioning about the fact that the economic crisis was more due to production problems than financing. That month, the Brazilian Central Bank announced a package of measures to guarantee the liquidity of the financial market, totaling R\$1.2 trillion. No counterpart was required for this measure whose beneficiaries were mainly private banks and investment brokers,¹³ which had their risky investments covered by State aid.

In addition to the president's words and public events endorsing the conclusion that the strategy was to make the virus circulate, Bulletin No. 10 "Direitos na Pandemia" (Rights in Pandemics), published by the CEPEDISA, a public health group at USP, and by Conectas Human Rights, analyzed 3.049 norms edited by the Union which lead to the same conclusion. Among the decrees analyzed by the researchers is, for example, the decree No. 10.344, which considered beauty salons and barbershops, sports academies of all modalities, and industrial activities (without

¹⁰ Despite the fact of extensive knowledge, see the article of 06/12/2021 "Bolsonaro e seguidores insistem em tratamento com cloroquina, ineficaz contra covid". Cf. <https://g1.globo.com/jornal-nacional/noticia/2021/06/12/bolsonaro-and-followers-insist-on-treatment-with-chloroquine-ineffective-against-covid.ghtml>. Accessed on: 08/06/2021.

¹¹ Despite the fact that it is widely known, the article "Bolsonaro esteve, em média, em uma aglomeração por dia durante a pandemia", of May 17, 2020, points out that Bolsonaro caused agglomerations in more than 60 public appearances. Cf. <https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/governo/em-dia-de-recorde-de-mortes-bolsonaro-questiona-o-uso-de-mascaras/>. Accessed on: 08/06/2021.

¹² Despite the fact of extensive knowledge, you can see the article "Em dia de recorde de mortes, Bolsonaro questiona o uso de máscaras". Cf. <https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/governo/em-dia-de-recorde-de-mortes-bolsonaro-questions-the-use-of-masks/>. Accessed on: 08/06/2021.

¹³ According to news from the Brazilian Government's own website, "Banco Central anuncia conjunto de medidas que liberam 1,2 trilhão à economia". Cf. <https://www.gov.br/pt-br/noticias/financas-impostos-e-gestao-publica/2020/03/central-bank-announces-set-of-measures-that-release-r-1-2-trillion-for-the-economy>. Accessed on: 08/08/2021.

specifying which ones) as essential activities amid the pandemic. On another occasion, even though his veto was overturned by Congress, through Message number 374, the president vetoed 25 provisions of Law No. 14.019 of 07/02/2020 that established the mandatory use of masks in commercial and industrial establishments, religious temples, schools and other closed places where people gather, under the justification that the device would incur in a possible home violation. The presidency also vetoed the imposition of a fine by federated entities in cases of non-compliance with the obligation to use masks and non-availability of 70% alcohol gel in places close to entrances, elevators and escalators in establishments authorized to operate during the pandemic of covid-19. On 08/15/2020, the government ignored an email from pharmaceutical Pfizer offering vaccines against SARS-COV2 with a delivery forecast that would allow vaccination to start in December 2020 at half the price charged with other countries.¹⁴ Likewise, through Message number 378, the presidency vetoed 14 provisions of Law No. 14.021 of 07/07/2020, which determined protection measures aimed at indigenous communities during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the distribution of food, seeds and agricultural inputs to families of indigenous people, quilombolas, artisanal fishermen and other traditional communities.¹⁵ Although this veto was also overturned by Congress, it is another indicator of the government's strategy and effort to face the pandemic.

For these reasons, the CEPEDISA report makes it clear how, even though the president's speeches are the most resonant in the media, the entire government adopted the strategy of spreading the virus in the population, without major contradictions with the president's public speeches. In this sense, the analysis of the research group concludes that one cannot even speak of errors or carelessness on the part of the government:

The results dispel the persistent interpretation that there was incompetence and negligence on the part of the federal government in managing the pandemic. On the contrary, the systematization of data, even if incomplete due to the lack of space for so many events, reveals the commitment and efficiency of the Union's action in favor of the wide spread of the virus in the national territory,

¹⁴ In addition to the aforementioned bulletin, check out the article "Bolsonaro recusou vacinas da Pfizer pela metade do preço pago por EUA e Europa". Cf. <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/cartaexpressa/bolsonaro-recusou-vacinas-da-pfizer-pela-half-of-the-price-paid-by-usa-and-europe/>. Accessed on: 08/09/2020.

¹⁵ All this information is contained in the aforementioned Bulletin No. 10 "Direitos na Pandemia", under the responsibility of the CEPEDISA group at USP, and by Conectas Human Rights.

declared with the objective of resuming the economic activity as quickly as possible and at any cost [our translation] (CEPEDISA, 2021, p. 7).

If the resumption of economic activity is certainly the main objective propagated in the official discourse of the executive power — a discourse that opposed the deaths caused by the virus to the deaths that would be caused by the supposedly avoidable economic slowdown without sanitary measures —, on the other hand, the pure and simple claim to freedom as opposed to the restrictions necessary to contain the contamination was a part of the Bolsonaro government's preaching that enjoyed significant popular support. After explicitly opposing the value of life to the value of freedom in the first half of 2020,¹⁶ the presidential dips on the beaches of the coast of São Paulo in early 2021 promoted agglomerations¹⁷ not in the name of economic recovery, but in the name of freedom to expose oneself and others at a time of growing contagion. Certainly, the appreciation of individual freedom at any cost cannot be dissociated from the indifference to the suffering of others legitimized by neoliberal rationality and displayed in speeches by the president and his supporters. Furthermore, if the governmental deviation from the function of preserving public health in the name of freedom found conditions of possibility and popular support, this was always accompanied, as we have seen, by a discourse full of disinformation, either by normalizing deaths or by minimizing of the effects of the virus, or even by promoting false treatments that supposedly would protect the population. In other words, the Bolsonaro government did not stop pretending to be doing everything possible to minimize the impacts of the pandemic, even if occasionally triggering the speech of a greater appreciation of freedom in relation to life.

Even so, the conditions for the possibility of such a discourse on the part of the government brings a relevant questioning to the Foucauldian thinking of biopolitics and points to the need for its updating in the face of transformations on a global scale in contemporary forms of government. An element that seems important to us in complementing the analysis on the conditions of possibility of claiming

¹⁶ See the article: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/agencia-estado/2020/05/21/bolsonaro-para-mim-tem-algo-que-e-mais-importante-que-a-vida-a-liberdade.htm>. Accessed on: 08/30/2021.

¹⁷ See the article: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2021/01/bolsonaro-abre-2021-com-nova-aglomeracao-em-praia-de-sp-desta-vez-dentro-dagua.shtml>. Accessed on: 08/30/2021.

freedom for the exposure of the entire population in the management of the pandemic in Brazil is the accelerated intensification of what Wendy Brown called “a disinhibited freedom, one symptomizing ethical destitution even as it often dresses in religious righteousness or conservative melancholy for a phantasmatic past” (BROWN, 2019, p. 171).

For Brown, as a result of the fusion between the neoliberal condemnation of politics and the social with the resentment for the current contestation of gender and race norms, this orientation of the will contests consolidated social norms and refuses the commitment to care for the future. In this case, Bolsonaro's repeated attacks on institutions help to identify his followers with the desire to carry out their individual will without restraint and without measuring consequences. Thus, even developing a strategy and theoretical concepts different from the Foucauldian approach, Brown's examination of the political rise of anti-democratic forces in the West adds crucial notions for the improvement of a diagnosis of the present. We argue in this sense, since, in a book completed in 2018, written still under the impact of Trump's victory in the 2016 USA's presidential elections, Brown describes powers of subjective formation capable of conferring a surprising intelligibility to what is happening in Brazil with the advance of Bolsonarism. For the purposes of this text, however, we would just like to point to this possible combination between Brown's analyzes of the rise of anti-democratic politics in the West and Foucault's biopolitics in order to comprehend the managing of COVID-19 pandemics by Brazilian government.

Final remarks

With this analysis, we have taken some initial steps to properly update Foucault's notion of biopolitics. Certainly, another step would be to detail more aspects of neoliberal governmentality. However, even a previous analysis of the functioning of security mechanisms and the production of insecurity helps us to understand the rationality that can guide government decisions to expose the population to the risks of contamination, illness, sequelae and death. Certainly, such a devaluation of the living conditions of the Brazilian population was built gradually,

not being an absolutely new reality constituted only during this government. Perhaps, the current Brazilian government operates a radicalization of certain aspects of the Brazilian social formation, instead of inaugurating a great novelty. Our colonial past, with the trivialization of extreme exploitation of the workforce, violence against blacks and indigenous people, the criminalization of social struggles, as well as the enormous concentration of wealth and inequality, are crucial points to understand how it was possible that, during the worst pandemic in recent decades, Bolsonaro's government adopted the strategy of a contaminating *laissez-faire* with authoritarian bias. For this, it would be important to resort to the specialized bibliography on the society of colonial Brazil and on the first republics, which would be another development of this work. However, even though it was not the only one responsible for such insecurity, certainly since the redemocratization of 1988, this was the government that worked the most towards radicalizing, consolidating and expanding the exposure of Brazilians' lives to all kinds of risk, including contamination in the current pandemic.

Another point that we would like to highlight is a little simpler, but it shows the fecundity of Foucauldian thought. This is a paradox that can be duly explained by the concept of biopolitics: perhaps, until today, no main political theory has thought that excess power can be caused by an attitude generally understood as inaction, as well as by mechanisms that impede regulations that could protect the population. Generally, the classic cases of excess, which can even justify the violent deposition of constituted power according to some traditions, involved the unjust attempt on the lives of subjects, forced conversion or persecutory legislation in religious matters. But apparent inaction never seems to have been the target of these main political theories. In this way, it is precisely through an analytics of power, much more concerned with scrutinizing the question "how does power happen?", that we can understand that perhaps it has never been so explicit that not acting by temporarily restricting certain freedoms can be a excess of power. In an even more specific way, inaction, in the sense of not taking sanitary measures that imply the temporary restriction of certain freedoms for reasons of public health and, on the contrary, preaching that one should have an almost normal life while a respiratory virus with high mutation probability spreads, this apparent inaction is a mode of action in the milieu, and not directly on

people's bodies and lives. However, acting on the milieu, not only evading government responsibility for public health, but also hindering the material implementation of social distancing measures and the use of protective equipment, in the name of freedom to come and go, one can easily multiply the number of infected, injured and dead. In other words, this apparent inaction, in fact, is an action on the milieu which aims stimulating the propagation of a virus in favor of maintaining unaltered economic activity and relations; this action on the milieu is constituted through the presidential speech, norms edited by the Union, but it is also reinforced by labor and social security reforms that precarize and impoverish the majority of the population.

A government can only be held responsible for the thousands of deaths caused due to the contaminating *laissez-faire* strategy, since we are under a biopolitical rationality. In the same way, the very strategy of making the virus circulate is also part of a biopolitical rationality, since the management of the mass vital phenomena of a population, either to favor contamination and promote genocide, or to prevent it and avoid the greatest possible number of dead, only reinforces the diagnosis that we live under a regime of conduction of conduct that still operates according to the general lines that delimit what Foucault designated as biopolitics. However, if we reduce biopolitics to a negative or positive adjective, it seems that we lose the analytical capacity of this concept (which is why we are also suspicious of the analytical gain that can be had by separating a biopolitics that defends and reinforces life, from a biopolitics focused on the to leave or to make die).

However, the fact that such different ways of dealing with the pandemic can be framed in biopolitics does not lead to the conclusion that they would be equivalent. This also does not lead to the conclusion that this concept would not help to analyze what is still happening, precisely because it encompasses such different realities. We must highlight that Foucault does not intend to provide a classical prescriptive conception of power. His diagnosis is not simply aimed at stating: we should be for (or against) biopolitics or disciplinary power, or that all power is bad by itself. It is not a matter of adopting the position according to which philosophy should legislate on the most just power. But in no way does this result in diminishing the critical dimension of this thought. Quite the contrary, this power analytics aims to build a

specific form of critical diagnosis that poses as a challenge to reality. This is an important theme of the Round Table of May 20, 1978, an interview that shows that Foucault was already dealing with the problems that he will present exactly seven days later, at the conference “What is criticism?”. In one of the May 20 questions, it will be reported that his research has led prison workers to a form of paralysis. Foucault will say that the fact that prison workers no longer know how to work in their daily lives after reading his books is an indication that they are in no way anesthetizing or sterilizing. On the contrary, if these people find themselves at an impasse, it is because they are not anesthetized, but rather uncomfortable with their daily work; and this impasse will only be transformed when we start to listen and learn to listen to everyone involved in the prison system, including detainees. In this sense, even if Foucault's works do not completely reject any possibility of reform, they will never assume the posture of reform established from above and from above. This is where he defines a specificity of the critical dimension of his thought:

Criticism doesn't have to be the premise of reasoning that ends like this: Here's what you need to do. It must be an instrument for those who fight, resist and no longer want what there is. It must be used in the process of conflicts, confrontations, attempts of rejection. It doesn't have to establish the law of the law. It is not a step in a program. Criticism is a challenge in relation to what there is [our translation] (FOUCAULT, 2001, p. 851).

Recently, Cesar Candiotti's book *A dignidade da luta política* makes important notes on passages like this. The central thesis, carefully constructed, is that there is a normativity in Foucauldian thought. However, it is not a prescriptive normativity, arising from a first philosophy, from the use of a faculty inherent to man, or from an intersubjective reason, as a big part of political theory has developed so far. It is a normativity immanent to political struggles, which, therefore, can never be defined in advance, in the same way that what constitutes an excess of power can never be defined in advance. Since power relations are always mobile relations, so are the ways of trying to reverse them. For this reason, we think that a political analysis like Foucault's can help to understand how it was possible that, practicing social isolation and the use of masks (which implies restricting one's freedom), fighting for the right and material conditions so that everyone could do the same, fight for vaccines that we still didn't have and for them to be distributed only free of charge by the public health system while they were still (and are still) scarce, and then make the decision

to go to the streets because nothing of that was guaranteed and to hold the federal government accountable for its acts and omissions, all this was and still is a fight against an excess of power that can be summed up in, during a pandemic, trying to persuade us and force us to conduct ourselves the same way we did when there was no pandemics. The self-restriction of our most basic freedoms and, later, the exposure to the risk of contamination in protests (certainly diminished through the wide free distribution of PFF2 masks), was a way of facing an excess of power that manifested itself through the defense of a freedom which, in a pandemic context, means a self-sacrifice and a compulsory sacrifice of others. The demand for the expansion of security mechanisms to fight the pandemic, aggravated by the economic and social conditions in Brazil, was a way of confronting the authoritarianism of the current government and the hypocrisy of the economic elite who defend the reproduction of this insecurity.

Finally, we would like to point out that in *Biopolitics in times of coronavirus*, Daniele Lorenzini makes important notes on the use of Foucauldian thinking to detail the problems brought or evidenced by the pandemic. First, we agree with his critique of the blackmail stance in relation to biopolitics. This blackmail consists of positioning ourselves in the face of a supposed choice between being for or against this power (LORENZINI, 2020, p. 42). Along with the emphasis on the unequal distribution of forms of vulnerability, which we have dealt with so far through the theme of insecurity, Lorenzini calls attention to the fact that biopolitics, as part of an ontology of the present, concerns what we are. However, the main objective of this critical ontology is to show how we became what we are, so that we stop being what we are, do and think, so that the analysis serves as a tool for those who fight against excesses of power. In the Brazilian case, this ontology should help in the fight against the promotion of insecurity in defense of a supposed freedom in the face of necessary sanitary controls. Therefore, once again the Foucauldian thought shows its relevance. In Brazil, and in Latin America in general, we have built societies that have trivialized extreme degrees of economic exploitation, violence and criminalization of social movements – the latter often demand state measures to protect themselves from situations of extreme insecurity. The critique of the current political management of the pandemic in Brazil can then be a point of articulation for various political struggles

both here and around the world, showing the excesses of power inherent in the abandonment and deliberate exposure of populations to illness and death. In this sense, the struggles for a social security leveled by higher income, since the pandemic showed how the oldest and poorest in Brazil are much more affected by the risks of contamination and, once dead, the families who were helped by retirees they were thrown into misery; struggles for labor rights that protect workers and their wages, since many were forced to work because eviction and hunger were a certainty, while death and the consequences of contamination were a possibility; the global struggle for equal access to vaccine distribution; the struggle for a universal minimum income that is not calculated in terms of minimum misery; the struggles against racism, sexism and homophobia were also allied to the containment of the pandemic, just remembering how the president said that we must face the pandemic as men, and that it seems that we are in a country of sissies. Acting as a sissy, and not embodying the kind of fragile, violent, self-sacrificial masculinity supported by the current government, is a way of protecting others and yourself. In this way, the guidelines defended by the workers' movements, by the Landless and Homeless Movements, by the LGBT movements, by the anti-racist movements, by the parties and NGOs that fight for progressive taxes, the fight for the strengthening and expansion of the Unified System of Health, the struggle of universities and research institutes for public funding and freedom of research, all of them found a common point of articulation in confronting what is the political rationality at work in the political project embraced by the current government and approved by almost all our oligarchic elite. Certainly, the constant confrontation of the excesses of power within the biopolitical rationality would imply the elaboration of a certain political spirituality capable of making the political struggle a form of continuous experience of transforming ourselves, but that would be a topic for another occasion. May the Foucauldian perspective make us stop rejecting any form of control before analyzing the power relations that are at stake, may it show us how often our daily life in freedom can be the space of controls that are much crueler than containment measures aimed at minimizing contamination and deaths, and that this perspective helps to put ourselves at stake, is already a good start.

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