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Bolsonaro's Brazil in Times of COVID-19: A Necropolitical Pharmakon

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MANUELA DA ROSA JORGE, MAY 19 2020

Since the start of the anti-corruption operation Car Wash in 2014, and increasingly after the impeachment of Brazil's first ever female president, Dilma Rousseff (Worker's Party; PT) in 2016, Brazil's population has found itself at a crossroads: people either still support Lula's party, the Workers' Party, or blame it for Brazil's "disease" (i.e., corruption) which was in need of an urgent cure. Against this backdrop, during the 2018 presidential elections the country faced a choice among 13 candidates, including the current right-wing President of Brazil, former backbench congressman Jair Messias Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro's campaign motto was an anti-corruption one, and it was also implicitly anti-PT. He presented himself as the remedy for Brazil's corruption disease. At that time, his apparent lack of filter and extravagant personality helped him to gain momentum, especially after the arrest of Lula in April 2018 (as well as the fact that during the first phase of the campaign he suffered a knife attack in which he was wounded in the stomach, and this fuelled many conspiracy theories and ever-more divisive rhetoric). Ultimately, Bolsonaro and PT's candidate, Professor Fernando Haddad, were the two candidates with the most votes in the first round of the election.

Despite his previous open idolatry of General Ustra, one of Brazil's most notorious torturers from the dictatorship period, his advocacy of the right to bear arms, and various homophobic, transphobic, misogynist, and racist episodes, Bolsonaro embodies a "myth" among his supporters as the man capable of curing Brazil of its corruption "disease". As we now know, Bolsonaro was elected in the second round of voting with 55.13% of votes against 44.87% for Haddad. Yet, to many Brazilians, what came after was a tragedy. At the time of writing, during this global pandemic, Bolsonaro has downplayed the death of more than fifteen thousand Brazilians due to Covid-19 and the overall pandemic situation. He has simultaneously become immersed in a corruption scandal involving his family, and faces a serious political crisis. Since the first Covid-19 infections and deaths in Brazil, governors (even those once aligned with Bolsonaro) have decided to take matters into their own hands due to Bolsonaro's policies. This has opened up a divide with tensions rising in Brazilian politics between federal and state powers, with Bolsonaro holding up federal financial support or imposing conditions on it.

Moreover, his authoritarian character has been highlighted after a series of clashes with his now former Health Minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, when the latter was fired for not agreeing with Bolsonaro; his successor, Nelson Teich, then resigned after less than a month in the job. In this spirit, Bolsonaro keeps reminding the media and his ministers that he is the "boss", and that anyone who does not follow his commands will be fired. The Justice Minister, Sergio Moro, who became famous as the Car Wash operation judge who ordered Lula's arrest in 2018, has also resigned due to the alleged interference of Bolsonaro in the Federal Police investigations, and several impeachment requests are now on the desk of the Congress President, Rodrigo Maia.

During February and March, as devastating news was spreading from East Asian and Southern European countries and scientific studies were becoming available, Bolsonaro's government had time to prepare and to implement a strategy to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in Brazil. However, his denial of the danger of Covid-19, his opposition to the WHO's guidance, and his anti-social distancing discourse and actions have been astounding, to say the least. For instance, he stated that the virus was (and still is) just a "little flu", and that the Covid-19 news in the Brazilian media was hysterical. He even stated that Brazilians should be studied because they "never catch anything" even if

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they dive into “sewage”; thus, he claimed, there was nothing to worry about with regard to Covid-19. Moreover, he participated in an anti-democratic protest outside the Presidential Palace. If this anti-democratic sentiment was not shocking enough, he did so without wearing a mask or respecting social-distancing.

As for the “masses”, the first Brazilian to sadly die of Covid-19 was a 63-year-old cleaning worker, Cleonice Gonçalves, in one of Brazil's most expensive neighbourhoods, Leblon, in Rio de Janeiro, whose employer had recently returned from a holiday to Italy, and was symptomatic. Although globally the discourse reiterates that the virus does not discriminate, in countries such as Brazil, where the public health system is on the verge of collapse and social inequality continues to increase, workers have to decide between going to work to earn a living at the risk of catching the virus or becoming unemployed. The immobility of the rich, safe under the roofs of their secure apartment complexes and able to afford medical care, is causing the poor's mobility to be as dangerous to them as the virus itself. This is because they need to go to work, and even if immobility is possible for them (if they can stay home), this often means living in the favelas, where another forecast tragedy is happening – one that follows a necropolitical dynamic of slow violence.

The deep inequalities in Brazilian demographics and living spaces are being highlighted now more than ever with the spread of Covid-19. The results in the poorest areas of the country could not be more devastating: mass graves are being used and Brazilians face the risk of living in the country with the highest rates of contagion in the world. They are being left to die due to Bolsonaro's necropolitical policies. As the country's leader, he offers no empathy or condolences, as this morbid statement demonstrates: ‘Some will die, so what? I lament it, what do you want me to do? I know my name is Messias [his middle name] but I can't work miracles’ – “Messias” stands for Messiah in Portuguese.

Once seen by millions as the remedy for Brazil's “disease”, Bolsonaro is turning into the poison many feared he would become. Not only does he perpetuate the same disease he claimed he would cure, corruption, he is also failing to prevent the deaths of thousands with his indifference and his necropolitical policies. We are witnessing in Brazil what Achille Mbembe described as ‘the senseless death of manifold innocent people, that is to say, of those whom one would expect to be spared, including in situations of extremity’. He was discussing Fanon's pharmakon in the colonial context, a situation which the Covid-19 pandemic echoes. It echoes Brazil's present moment not for its similarities with the colonial context per se, but due to its tension between indifference and action; according to Mbembe, ‘conquest and colonial occupation demanded not only an extraordinary aptitude for indifference but also norm-defying capacities to perform properly repugnant acts.’ Hence, during colonisation, colonised bodies endured not only the violence performed against them in the form of exploitation, oppression, and killings; they also endured their colonisers' indifference towards their very existence and subsequent suffering.

Today in Brazil, it will be the elderly, the Indigenous population, and the poorest who will continue to pay the price of Bolsonaro's poison if nothing is done to remedy Brazil's current necropolitical pharmakon. Banging pots and pans alone will not do the job. Empathy, solidarity, and collective action are needed – now more than ever.

About the author:

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