

Hunger, unemployment, corruption, and preventable deaths: faces of necropolitics

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THE BRAZILIAN PEOPLE SUFFER FROM THE HARSHIPS ARISING FROM the adoption of economic policies practiced by the government, which submits to the interests of the market and capital to the detriment of the population's needs and demands. The national elites have always been favored in different governments, but the discreet changes that aimed at reducing inequalities, which took place in the Lula and Dilma administrations, provoked reactions to the extent of justifying the institutional-media coup of 2016.

From the beginning, Michel Temer's administration aligned itself with neoliberal principles and implemented measures that would allegedly save the economy, but very bitter for the people: the labor reform, which took away workers' rights, and the Constitutional Amendment 95, which froze for 20 years social investments by the federal government. The insistence on this path, which was already being discouraged by multilateral institutions, deepened unemployment, hunger, and social inequalities, without causing any dynamism in the national economy.

This was already the social and economic scenario when the Covid-19 pandemic began in February 2020, that is, the pandemic should not be held separately responsible for the converging health, economic, and political crises that plague the country. Bolsonaro took office in 2019 based on the conception of a State aimed at favoring, expanding, and strengthening the market, supported by the implementation of an economic policy based on the reduction of public spending and on the privatization of companies that make up the national heritage. With growing unemployment, an inexpressive Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and no project for Brazil, the government has been limping since its first year in office, while flooding public opinion with fake news, spreading hatred and intolerance, feeding with anti-democratic speeches and ideas a horde of fanatical supporters calling for military intervention and the destruction of the institutions of our democracy.

The pandemic and the aggravating consequences of the crises leave painful marks. The mourning of the families of nearly 600,000 victims, the massive unemployment and hunger that hits a large portion of the population throughout the country generate hopelessness and reduce the prospects for the future. An opinion poll carried out at the end of 2020¹ revealed that 59% of the households interviewed were in a situation of food insecurity and that at least 15% lived with a daily and constant lack of food. This situation worsened throughout 2021, as unemployment increased, emergency aid was interrupted from January to April, the amount of money paid was reduced, and inflation is close

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to 8%, with rising prices in the food group being the most representative ones. Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE)² show that the National Consumer Price Index (INPC), the official indicator of low-income inflation, has already risen 5.9% from January to September 2021, in one of the highest rises for the period in the last 20 years. An inflation that heavily penalizes the poorest.

The omission, incompetence, and denial of the federal government in fighting the pandemic immobilized the Ministry of Health, which did not assume its role as the coordinator of the Unified Health System (SUS), did not buy vaccines, tests and supplies in a timely manner. Furthermore, the lack of planning caused the expiration of vaccines, medicines, diagnostic tests, among other items worth R\$ 243 million, which will be incinerated³.

The Parliamentary Inquiry Commission (CPI) installed in the Federal Senate has been showing Brazil the grotesque x-ray of corruption within the government, involving the military, managers, businessmen, religious men, and politicians who have indulged themselves to enrich with the health crisis, the pain, and the death of the Brazilian people. Every day, new accusations come to light that involve everything from negotiations to the carrying out of ‘studies’ with results ordered to justify the use of drugs without efficacy for Covid-19, which are of interest to the Presidency of the Republic. Brazilians continue to be appalled by the dimension and seriousness of the crimes involving the president and which support and justify the more than one hundred impeachment requests systematically ignored by the president of the Federal Chamber in his interest and in obedience to the wealthy elites who command national politics and disdain poverty in the country, as noted by Noam Chomsky in a recent interview: “I have rarely seen a country where the elite has such contempt for the poor as Brazil”⁴.

The federal government’s necropolitics have already caused the death of nearly 600,000 people by Covid-19, thousands of them preventable. Hallal⁵ states that out of every five deaths that take place in Brazil by this disease, four could have been avoided. The calculation is based on mortality per million inhabitants, whereas, in the world, 488 people died per million inhabitants; and in Brazil, 2.3 thousand deaths per million inhabitants, that is, four times more than the world average.

Wernek et al.⁶ consider preventable deaths by Covid-19 as those that would not occur if populational actions and actions in health services were adopted. Populational actions are measures to reduce the levels of transmission of the disease with a consequent reduction in the number of cases and deaths, such as: temporary closure of economic activities, physical distancing, reduced mobility, limitation of agglomerations, control of ports, airports and borders. Actions in health services include measures to reduce the severity of illness and death, including outpatient and hospital care. Measures to reduce the probability of infection include both populational actions and health service actions: individual protection, case tracking, prospective and retroactive contact tracking, isolation, quarantine, and vaccines.

Certainly, the federal government’s intentional disregard for science, international recommendations and health authorities; the lack of national coordination in fighting the pandemic, the delay in acquiring vaccines – the only medicine capable of preventing deaths from Covid-19 – have accumulated as being responsible for the hundreds of thousands of preventable deaths caused by the disease in the country.

Eight months after the beginning of vaccination, on January 17, 2021, only 35% of the population is fully vaccinated with two doses of the immunizing agent or with a single

dose, and 67.3% have taken at least one dose of the vaccine⁷. This is far from what is desired and far from the capacity that SUS has to carry out mass vaccination campaigns in Brazil. The slowness of vaccination keeping the vaccine coverage low facilitates the spread of the virus, the emergence of new variants, and further increases the number of preventable deaths. Although, at this time, there is a clear reduction in the rate of contamination and deaths by Covid-19 resulting from vaccination, the spread of the Delta variant in some states is still worrying. The recommendation of the third dose or booster dose, especially for the older people, and the extension of the application of vaccines to adolescents and infants are at the center of political disputes and games between the federal and state governments.

In this scenario, the country consolidates itself as one of the nations that suffered the most from the impacts of the pandemic without any strategy to avoid or protect the population. Rebuilding Brazil will require the involvement and work of everyone, particularly the democratic forces that recognize a dignified destiny for the Brazilian people and nation.

The pandemic proved the importance of the SUS, but it remains threatened by neo-liberal policies and the anger of those who want to use it to get rich. Health needs will increase due to the deleterious effects of the social and economic crisis, the damming of health measures during the pandemic, and the still-unknown sequelae resulting from Covid-19. We will need a stronger SUS, with more resources and more present in the lives of the population. However, the proposal that it is necessary to control public spending and reduce the size of the State remains strong. The population knows very well what it is to control expenditures and does not advocate spending, but it certainly defends that a good size for the State is the one in which the well-being and rights of citizens fit. It is urgent to end the expenditure ceiling, which has already proved bankrupt. For more resources, we need a tax reform that protects labor and production and charges the rich and the unproductive capital.

For the community in the field of health, it is left the challenge of recovering the bases of health reform in permanent political action that deepens collective awareness with values of democracy and the importance of social and health rights.

Collaborators

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