ARTICLES

Public university in Brazil: a civil war battlefield?

Universidade pública no Brasil: um campo de guerra civil[1]?

Universidad pública en Brasil: ¿campo de guerra civil?

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[1] The expression "civil war" was taken from the title of Dardot et al.'s (2021) book *The Choice of Civil War*, in which the authors discuss neoliberal strategies for draining the political forces of resistance in favor of the growth of everyday disputes that weaken the collective meaning of the social bond.

Abstract

This article, produced within the scope of a multicenter study on mental health in the university context, emerges from fragments of statements by young university students gathered in conversation circles, as well as from reflections arising from readings related to the study's theme. Although the expansion of access to higher education has brought new future prospects for young Brazilians, they point out numerous difficulties along their academic journey, which may be linked to the high rate of psychic suffering among students, expressed in the rising statistics of suicide and depression. The writing revisits certain features of coloniality, regarding the social position of public universities in the country. It also problematizes the effects of neoliberal discourses in framing the university as a space of civil war.

Keywords: University, neoliberalism, mental health, psychoanalysis, youth.

Resumo

Este artigo, produzido no âmbito de uma pesquisa multicêntrica sobre saúde mental na universidade, decanta de fragmentos de falas de jovens universitários recolhidas por meio de rodas de conversas bem como de reflexões produzidas pelas leituras relativas ao tema do estudo. Ainda que a ampliação no acesso à universidade tenha trazido novas perspectivas de futuro para jovens brasileiros, muitas dificuldades são apontadas por eles durante o percurso acadêmico e podem estar articuladas ao alto índice de sofrimento psíquico entre universitários, cuja expressão se apresenta nas estatísticas crescentes de suicídio e depressão. Na escrita, retomam-se alguns traços de colonialidade, relativos ao lugar social da universidade pública no País. Problematizam-se ainda os efeitos dos discursos neoliberais ao identificar a universidade como espaço de guerra civil.

Palavras-chave: Universidade, neoliberalismo, saúde mental, psicanálise, juventude.

Resumen

Este artículo, producido en el marco de una investigación multicéntrica sobre salud mental en la universidad, se decanta de fragmentos de intervenciones de jóvenes universitarios recogidas por medio de círculos de conversación, así como de reflexiones producidas a partir de lecturas relativas al tema de estudio. Aunque la ampliación del acceso a la universidad haya traído nuevas perspectivas de futuro para los jóvenes brasileños, ellos señalan muchas dificultades a lo largo del recorrido académico, las cuales pueden estar vinculadas al alto índice de sufrimiento psíquico entre universitarios, cuya expresión se manifiesta en las crecientes estadísticas de suicidio y depresión. En el texto se retoman algunos rasgos de colonialidad, relativos al lugar social de la universidad pública en el país. Asimismo, se problematizan los efectos de los discursos neoliberales al identificar la universidad como un espacio de guerra civil.

Palabras clave: Universidad, neoliberalismo, salud mental, psicoanálisis, juventud.

De errar
O medo
De continuar
De parar
De tentar
Medo de morrer
Mas tenho medo de
Viver
Me sufoco em mim mesma
As vezes penso em me odiar
Por esse medo que
Nem culpa tenho de ter.

(Codinome, 2019) [2]

Introduction

The psychic ailing of young Brazilians has become a specter haunting the academic community, particularly within public universities. In view of the increase in mental health issues among Brazilian youth, we have chosen in this paper to highlight fragments of narratives from university students heard in conversation circles, linking these accounts to situations mapped by national and international health agencies. In this context, we argue that while life in the academic community can mean an expansion of worldviews and social inclusion for thousands of young people who enter it, in some cases, it may coincide with an experience of psychic suffering.

The 5th National Survey on the Socioeconomic and Cultural Profile of Undergraduate Students at Federal Institutions of Higher Education (V Pesquisa Nacional de Perfil Socioeconômico e Cultural do(as) Graduandos(as) das Instituições Federais de Ensino Superior – IFES), conducted in 2018 by the National Association of Directors of Federal Institutions of Higher Education – Andifes – (2019), indicates that 83.05% of respondents reported emotional difficulties during their academic journeys. The data show that anxiety and discouragement appear most frequently, followed by thoughts of death (10.8%) and suicidal ideation (8.5%) — suicide is the second leading cause of death among university students. The report also states

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[2] Poem written by a university student during one of the conversation circles with students participating in the outreach project *From School to University: Listening to Malaise* (*Da escola à universidade: escutando o mal-estar*), developed at the Fluminense Federal University (UFF) and the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO) (Gageiro & Andrade, 2019).

that, compared to the previous survey, conducted in 2014 by Andifes as well (2016), there was an increase in suicidal ideation rates. Andifes identifies suicide as the second leading cause of death among university students — and, more broadly, suicide is cited as the fourth leading cause of death among youth in general (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). In the Brazilian context, the Mortality Information System (Sistema de Informações sobre Mortalidade – SIM) showed that, in 2023, suicide was the second leading cause of death among young people aged 15 to 19 and the fourth leading cause among those aged 20 to 29 (Ministério da Saúde, 2024). In publications such as those cited above, educational level — that is, lower schooling — is identified as a risk factor for self-inflicted deaths, as this factor influences others, such as access to information and physical and mental health services, as well as low income among young workers with limited schooling — and, as a possible consequence, resource constraints and social vulnerability.

One of the issues we identify as a potential factor in the aggravation of suffering within universities is associated with new forms of admission, whether through the social and geographical mobility enabled by the National High School Exam (Exame Nacional do Ensino Médio – Enem) and the Unified Selection System (Sistema de Seleção Unificada – Sisu), or through inclusion and retention policies that especially serve low-income populations, Black students, and Indigenous students. The survey conducted by Andifes (2019) shows that emotional difficulties are associated with financial hardship, excessive academic workload, and commuting time to the university. Among the challenges that most affect academic performance are intolerance, discrimination, and prejudice. It is possible that all these variables, to some extent, contribute to the high rates of university dropout also observed in research. According to the report, more than half (52.8%) of students at Federal Institutions of Higher Education (IFES) have considered dropping out, citing financial hardship (32.8%), high academic demands (29.7%), difficulties in reconciling study and work (23.6%), and health problems (21.2%) among the prevailing causes (Andifes, 2019). In fact, as also stated in the report, there is a clear association between higher dropout risks and monthly household income, especially among those whose income is up to one and a half minimum wages (54.4%).

In addition to Brazilian youth, WHO studies indicate a high prevalence of mental health problems among university students in different countries. One of WHO's surveys found that 35% of young university students worldwide exhibit symptoms of anxiety or depression

(Alvarez, 2023). We know that a combination of factors contributes to this phenomenon, as it is a critical stage of life. In this regard, we cannot overlook the discussion on the role of higher education institutions in preventing this issue.

Balanzá-Martínez, psychiatrist and professor at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Valencia, coordinated a study conducted in 2022 with undergraduate and graduate students from five major public and private universities in Spain (Alvarez, 2023). In this study, the participants answered a questionnaire that included questions on symptoms of depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, insomnia, alcohol and drug abuse, as well as sociodemographic variables. According to the researcher, the study, which involved 1.7 million students, found that one in three had experienced at least one episode requiring some form of mental health care in the past 12 months. In this regard, we ask ourselves: what has been driving the increase in psychic suffering among students and faculty over the past decade?

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, there were predictions of a possible epidemic of issues related to mental health in Brazil, affecting primarily the younger segments of the population — a situation that would have worsened with the forced confinement and the succession of deaths witnessed by the public. To provide a more current picture of the problem, in Brazil, the 2017 Mental Health Atlas (WHO, 2018) estimates that 18.6 million Brazilians have been diagnosed with anxiety and 11.5 million with depression. Furthermore, Brazil leads such diagnoses in Latin America and ranks second in the Americas, behind only the United States, which has 19 million people with depression. When we look at Brazilian youth, we find that manifestations of mental illness have increased and are expressed through high rates of suicide and attempted self-inflicted deaths.

In this context, a group of faculty members and researchers from public universities in Brazil, Argentina, and France decided to take a closer look at how psychic suffering manifests in universities through the development of the multicenter project "Psychoanalysis and Mental Health in the University: Policies of Life, Listening, and Psychic Survival in Dark Times" (*Psicanálise e saúde mental na Universidade: políticas de vida, escuta e sobrevivência psíquica em tempos sombrios*). The project problematizes shared concerns about the issue of malaise in public universities and in the current social fabric, particularly regarding aspects related to neoliberal practices in Brazil's sociopolitical context in recent years. In addition, the research is the result

of an integrated effort among various research laboratories[3] located in different public universities in the three countries involved (Brazil, Argentina, and France).

This article is one of the products of the multicenter research project, in which conversation circles[4] were held on the topic of malaise with university students from UFF. The writing process — combined with a literature review on the subject — was centered on the conversations from these circles. We emphasize that the developments arising from the collected narratives, particularly those related to expressions of suffering, were recorded in experience journals[5] and discussed by the researchers of NUPPEC-Axis 3/UFRGS and LAPSE/UFF throughout 2022.

We understand that public universities, both state and federal, play a particularly important role in addressing the issue of malaise, as many of these episodes occur, or are at least identified and shared, within the university environment. In any case, we know that situations of psychic suffering and mental illness are not limited to public universities; there are students and faculty members at private institutions who report serious mental health problems throughout their academic lives.

In such a concerning scenario, we ask ourselves about the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions that contribute to it, in society as a whole and in public universities in particular. We believe that placing individual responsibility on the causes of illness has generated

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[3] We refer to the ties between the Research Center on Psychoanalysis, Education, and Culture – Axis on Psychoanalysis, Education, Sociopolitical Interventions, and Critical Theory (NUPPEC-Axis 3) of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS); the Laboratory of Psychoanalysis, Society, and Politics of the University of São Paulo (PSOPOL/USP); the Research Directory on Psychoanalysis, Education, and the Social Bond of the Fluminense Federal University (LAPSE/UFF); the Laboratory for Research on Philosophy Teaching of the Federal University of ABC (LAPEFIL/UFABC); and the following networks: the Psychoanalysis and Education Working Group (GT) of the National Association for Research and Graduate Studies in Psychology (ANPEPP), the International University Network for Studies in Education and Psychoanalysis (RUEPSY), and the International Research Network Group for Studies on Neoliberalism and Alternatives (Gena).

[4] The conversation circles, conducted from the perspective of research-intervention, took place within the scope of the outreach project *From School to University: Listening to Malaise* (Gageiro & Andrade, 2019). We emphasize that such circles are not affiliated with an experimental perspective, which typically aims to alter what is initially constituted as a problem for the group. In the circles we conducted, grounded in psychoanalysis, the researcher listens to the participants' collective discourse without the intention of identifying something specific, but rather with the aim of creating conditions for different meanings to emerge within the narratives (Strzykalski & Gurski, 2020).

[5] The experience diaries constitute a tool for recording research experiences developed in the course of the investigations and interventions of NUPPEC-Axis 3. They consist of "a compilation written by the researcher-psychoanalyst regarding their experiences, observations, and reflections in the course of their research activities" (Gurski, 2019, p. 181).

even more suffering. Investigating the distress of the academic community and intervening in it requires understanding how recent changes in Brazilian society affect the modes of subjectivation forged within the social fabric, producing impacts on what is referred to as distress in the university.

The choice of the notion of malaise (*Unbehagen*) in psychoanalysis as a way of thinking about the impasses in the bonds experienced by young university students is not merely the borrowing of a term used by Freud (1930/1996), but also a political strategy that includes reflections on the social bond. In his text on *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, Freud states that, in addition to life in society providing a sense of security and belonging, we are confronted with the malaise that is irreducible to life in society. Therefore, beyond symptomatic issues, malaise encompasses a broader discussion of the problems that shape social bonds.

Given conditions such as those described above, students' psychic suffering may also precede their entry into the university, being shaped not exclusively by the academic journey but, above all, by the precarious living conditions that affect access to basic rights such as housing, transportation, leisure, and others. Thus, even though universities have been preparing to face the challenges posed by the necessary democratization of access to higher education, they come up against much broader sociopolitical issues that require a more comprehensive analysis of the malaise that manifests within them.

The atmosphere of demonization of public universities through reduced investment in research and science over the past four years in Brazil has generated a series of fake news stories that have fueled the social imagination, weakening the strength of university institutions. The narratives constructed erode the working conditions of faculty and students, leading to the impoverishment of the symbolic function of academic production within the social fabric. In this regard, it is important to engage in a broad discussion of the variables that shape the illness of the Brazilian university community, as such illness may account for the widespread process of demonization that teaching careers, research, and science have been facing.

We must engage in a critical debate on the conditions and contradictions that shape the social role historically occupied by public universities in Brazil, not only regarding the construction of knowledge but also concerning the creation of new futures for young people and for the country. In this paper, we first seek to revisit some considerations on the possible

colonial roots that still persist in the functioning of Brazilian universities, then move on to the core arguments of this article, namely, the university as a stage for civil war and its effects on the mental health of the academic community.

Brief Considerations on Colonialism and Coloniality in Brazilian Universities

Higher education in Brazil was established with a strong intention of reinforcing colonial ties. The first Brazilian university, the University of Rio de Janeiro, was founded in 1920 through a decree. The main reason for its creation was reportedly the diplomatic need to grant the title of *Doctor Honoris Causa* to the King of Belgium during his visit to the country (Souza, 2012). Thus, from its inception, the Brazilian university presented itself as a place for the production of knowledge sustained by the coloniality of knowledge and power — a space from which other forms of knowledge, apart from that of white origin, were excluded. This process gave shape to the contours of racism and sexism in the field of academic knowledge, grounded in Eurocentrism.

Eurocentrism, according to Said (1990), constitutes a dominant style of knowledge, in which European culture produced and managed knowledge in various fields, promoting it as a system of truth about the other. This occurred through the expansion of colonization and imperialism over other cultures. In this sense, academic knowledge in the country remained under the coloniality of power in society, reproducing it even in the postcolonial context. For Quijano (2005), this was a system established by white and mestizo elites that upheld racial hierarchies. Thus, the symbolic history we have inherited in higher education has been the reproduction of colonial domination and control, favoring the interests of the white slaveholding elites.

This white intellectual elite, predominant in Brazilian universities, sought autonomy of thought. However, such autonomy remained colonized both by the hegemony of European ethno-racial theories and by the epistemological colonization of knowledge, which also ended up sustaining the establishment of structural racism in the country and the valorization of whitening policies, grounded in convictions that claimed to be scientific, regarding the supposed superiority of white Europeans and, consequently, the inferiority of Black and Indigenous

peoples. Silva (2018) points out: "Despite the administrative independence from Portuguese colonization, we imported other forms of colonization, shaping our context of colonialities, especially epistemological ones, producing ourselves as Europe's shadow and affirming ourselves as its other" (p. 236).

The ideology of European racial superiority gained strength through the reproduction of the ideas of 19th-century intellectuals and academics, whose influence remains present today in national culture and universities, generating social and political impasses such as the difficulty in embracing cultural diversity and the production of academic knowledge. The theses on racial democracy, upheld by many intellectuals in the early 20th century, had the effect of erasing the conflicting relations between Black and white people in Brazil. The experience of violence, without due symbolic recognition, removed the possibility of its elaboration.

According to Figueiredo and Grosfoguel (2007), the topic of racial relations involving Black and Indigenous peoples has always been a subject of study carried out by white anthropologists and sociologists. Regarding the production of academic knowledge, we emphasize that Eurocentric epistemology has always predominated, concealing racial power hierarchies in which the work of Black researchers was rejected. The authors also stress that the marginalization of intellectual production and the exclusion of Black professionals from university spaces were concealed by the denial of racism.

In the current context of universities, we are still under the strong influence of the colonial legacy left by three centuries of slavery. Mignolo (2005) points out that coloniality has extended as an expression of the structure of power relations. The author distinguishes between colonialism as an approach to the historical period and current forms of colonialisms and colonialities. We understand that, even with Black movements advancing in their claims and

building a political process aimed at pressuring the State to take responsibility for formulating and sustaining policies that promote racial equality, we still suffer from the effects mentioned above. In any case, we emphasize that, starting in the 2000s, there was an attempt to reconfigure the State, in which we find strategic spaces for the pursuit of rights continuously denied to the Black population with respect to access to higher education (Silva, 2018).

Even so, it is possible to observe the emergence of narratives and expressions of racism that oppose the implementation of public educational policies in higher education. These positions are contrary to affirmative policies aimed at repairing historical social injustices regarding the inclusion of Black and Indigenous people in public universities, maintaining the belief in the myth of superior and inferior races. Examples of such manifestations can be seen in hazing rituals during the reception of first-year students, where sexist and racist practices predominate amid hate speech. Other examples concern the reproduction, by the university community itself, of academic racism, materialized in stereotypes and stigmas directed at Black students.

This violence and criminalization within university spaces are also manifested through epistemic racism, which contributes to the malaise and psychic suffering of students and faculty in Brazilian universities. Pinheiro (2023) highlights the importance of intellectualizing Black people, that is, in addition to presenting theoretical references from Black intellectuals, it is necessary for Black people with racial literacy to occupy academic spaces. The author emphasizes that this is an important anti-racist strategy, as it enables the creation of a representative and diverse environment. This occurs because there is a necropolitical logic of "letting die" that is expressed through the silencing and invisibility of Black and Indigenous people in universities, maintaining what we have understood as a state of "civil war" (Dardot et al., 2021).

Although, in recent years, some policies have sought to address historical social inequalities through new forms of university admission and retention, we observe that the history of the university in Brazil is marked by the reproduction of the colonialist logic that perpetuates social inequality and bears the marks of an authoritarian, racist, and colonial institutional legacy. We are left to consider how the entry of neoliberalism into the country reactivates the dispute between colonialisms and decolonialisms within the sphere of education.

We cannot overlook the fact that neoliberalism strongly impacts democratic values, and in the Global South its effects are more complex due to the fragility of democracies. In any case, openness to otherness does not come without resistance. Let us examine how neoliberal discourse and practices affect the social bond and relationships within universities so that we may consider new openings for old impasses.

Neoliberal Discourse and Social Bonds in Universities

In a recent article in the newspaper *Folha de S.Paulo*, Minhoto et al. (2023), coordinators of SOU Ciência, based on the question "Does Brazil need public universities?" (*O Brasil precisa de Universidades públicas?*), reveal a little-known reality. According to them, the Brazilian State funds a large portion of private colleges. According to the 2021 Higher Education Census (Censup)[6], the federal government financed a total of 2,646,403 enrollments in these institutions, meaning that public investment in private colleges accounts for approximately 38.3% of the sector's enrollments (Inep, 2022).

Minhoto et al. (2023) argue that, regardless of the expansion of access to higher education through such funding, the quality of education is very different in public universities. This is especially true because Brazilian public universities are responsible for most of the country's scientific, technological, and cultural production. Without them, higher education would be limited to a segment of private institutions that, for the most part, treat the educational sector as a business, exploiting it solely as a source of profit. In addition, they do not invest in research and innovation, nor do they establish meaningful relationships with community demands through outreach work.

Starting with the neoliberal reforms implemented during the 1990s in Brazil, a new form of education management took hold, closely resembling a corporate management model whose characteristics include the relentless pursuit of efficiency, rewards based on results, and the promotion of competition, which has been imposed both in school education and in universities (Maia et al., 2015). Alongside these reforms, which entail greater participation by companies,

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[6] The Censup is conducted annually by the Anísio Teixeira National Institute for Educational Studies and Research (Inep).

banks, and financial regulatory bodies in public policy decision-making in education, there have been significant advances on the part of Brazilian social movements (Gonçalves & Silva, 2000).

Therefore, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the debate on education within the country's social and economic structure intensified. In this regard, the Black Movement, through its various organizations, played a key role in consolidating public and media discussions on racial discrimination in Brazil. Since then, a series of programs and public policies have been adopted to expand and facilitate access to higher education, especially for economically, socially, and geographically disadvantaged populations. Federal-level initiatives were implemented, such as the University for All Program (*Programa Universidade para Todos –* ProUni) and the Support Program for Restructuring and Expansion Plans of Federal Universities (*Programa de Apoio a Planos de Reestruturação e Expansão das Universidades Federais –* Reuni)[7].

Law No. 12,711 of August 29, 2012 (2012) — the Quotas Law (*Lei de Cotas*) — which is responsible for changing the profile of students in federal universities and institutes, reached its 10th anniversary in 2022. From 2013 to 2019, the percentage variation of Black (*pretos*), mixed-race (*pardos*), Indigenous, and low-income students from public schools increased by 205% (Heringer & Carreira, 2022). As for faculty, the 2021 Higher Education Census (Censup) (Inep, 2022) shows an increase in the representation of the Black population among university professors in recent years. Currently, Black people (both *pretos* and *pardos*) hold 24.1% of faculty positions in higher education, indicating that the advances resulting from the combination of factors such as the introduction of the Quotas Law in public service recruitment in 2008 and the launch of Reuni are beginning to show positive results. However, it must be acknowledged that the growth of this representation is still slow for a country where Black people constitute the majority of the population.

Affirmative action in universities has made higher education institutions more diverse and has enabled many young people to find new forms of social inclusion and organization, such as the collectives formed among the student population. These movements have come to play a protective role in the lives of students who often associate their ability to remain in university with belonging to these groups. On the other hand, the changes in the student profile

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[7] The Reuni program was launched in 2007.

in recent years have prompted universities to "look within themselves and identify the numerous processes, subtle or otherwise, of exclusion embedded in their functioning, processes that, in practice, went unnoticed by the white economic elite that attended them" (Feres et al., 2018).

The institutional structure of Federal Institutions of Higher Education (IFES) has sought to meet the new demands that have arisen through various forms of scholarships, allowances, and health and mental health services. Based on preliminary data from the previously mentioned multicenter study, which mapped institutional responses to the demands of this new student population, directly or indirectly related to mental health, we can gain a comprehensive view of the mechanisms for student support, assistance, and retention in Brazilian universities.

Questionnaires were administered to 16 Brazilian universities, either participants in the project or partner institutions, with data corresponding to the years 2018 to 2022. The questions addressed topics such as student aid, mental health care programs, institutional partnerships with the public health system or with outreach projects, rates of service utilization, and the main complaints reported by students. Based on the responses obtained, we found a growing presence of mental health care services in universities, as well as specific support policies for certain groups, such as quota students, people of African descent, Indigenous people, transgender individuals, and people with disabilities, which, however, are still unable to meet actual demand and remain uneven across the universities analyzed.

The structuring of support services, the monitoring of risk factors, and the implementation of inclusive policies were essential measures to ensure that students had access not only to higher education but also to an environment conducive to their psychological and social well-being. We emphasize, however, that the movement to open the university through Reuni and affirmative action policies was not sufficiently supported by policies to ensure access and retention for new entrants. On the contrary, over the years, public universities have undergone successive cutbacks in resources allocated to higher education and student assistance.

It is important to note that the expansion of access to higher education has been built in the midst of the incursion of neoliberalism into the field of higher education. The neoliberal perspective, in addition to introducing market logic through administrative reforms that emphasize competition, productivity, and meritocracy, has been responsible for the

financialization of social bonds and for emptying the political dimension in student education. Dardot and Laval (2016) interpret contemporary capitalism through a neoliberal rationality that has been imposed as a new reason for the world. In this way, significant structural changes are produced in all social spheres, shifting individuals toward a deadly competition fueled by the encouragement for each person to become a kind of entrepreneur of oneself, producing new forms of subjectivity and introducing a conception of "rationalization of desire" (Dardot & Laval, 2016).

Added to this are the transformations in interpersonal bonds brought about by the logic of self-valorization or self-devaluation. With practices grounded in individualization, competitiveness, and social inequalities, neoliberalism reconfigures people's ways of being and existing. Such rationality modifies the social bond, giving rise to new social symptoms: depression and the pathology of insufficiency, as failure in productivity and in the performance of tasks becomes an individualized pathology (Dardot & Laval, 2016; Kehl, 2015).

We are witnessing such a depoliticization of the social bond and of educational practices that it results in a reduction of the subject's capacity to dream and, in dreaming, to renew themselves and the world. This reduction produces what Fisher (2020) calls a private epidemic of suffering, whose effect is the individualization of anguish, leading many young Brazilians to severe depression and, not infrequently, to suicide attempts. In this context, we must reflect on how to refound the capacity to dream of the possibility of transforming worlds (Gurski & Lo Bianco, 2023).

Fisher (2020), drawing on Fredric Jameson, recalls that one of the most significant contemporary forms of illness has been the notion that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Capitalist realism permeates society with the feeling that liberalism is the only possible way forward, while everything else would be illusion and utopia. The atmosphere of capitalist realism is so pervasive in terms of the impoverishment of culture and imagination that, instead of the feeling of an end of history, we experience only a slow cancellation of the future (Gurski, 2023b).

In the sharp analyses Fisher produced during his lifetime, he highlighted two important points regarding the collective dimension of psychic ailing: the effects of neoliberal capitalism on mental health, that is, the sociopolitical dimension of suffering; and what he called the

shortening of cultural and political imagination (Gurski, 2023a). These issues are also related to what he referred to as the decomposition of collectivity and the absence of the instrumentalization of libido for political purposes (Fisher, 2020).

We understand that we must, indeed, advance in developing a line of thought on the sociopolitical variables that contribute to the apparent scenario of psychic ailing among today's youth. To analyze the situation with the necessary complexity, we need to problematize and discuss the effects of the impoverishment of the collective and political dimension in social and educational formation, as well as the relationships between the practices of late capitalism, the bureaucratization of life, and the considerable increase in mental health issues (Gurski, 2023c).

In this scenario, we start from the premise that the historical social, racial, and cultural conflicts present since the country's founding are reproduced in the everyday practices of Brazilian universities. At present, this conflict is updated in a perverse articulation between neoliberal practices, the slaveholding past, and the well-known coloniality of national thought. Thus, we seek to understand how this process has unfolded, considering the need for a decolonial perspective to combat the severe segregation that some groups still experience in the social bond and within Brazilian universities.

It is precisely along these lines that this article seeks to analyze the extent to which Brazilian universities have become a kind of stage for the civil war promoted by the premises of neoliberalism and capitalist realism (Dardot & Laval, 2016; Fisher, 2020). The competitions and disputes that occur from the moment of admission to the university foster a highly harmful atmosphere, further highlighting inequalities and producing significant psychic suffering.

From this perspective, instead of a best friend, the figure of the "best enemy" (*frenemy*)[8], a fundamental aspect of the climate of civil war, or even of fascist bonds, since it is those closest to us who become the most dangerous. In the face of conflicts that fray relationships, conditions are created that work toward the dismantling of the collective dimension of bonds, giving rise to the anti-bond.

From this mechanism derives the idea of civil war — more precisely, a civil war waged within the social bond of the university locus, in the case of this work. As we have already

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[8] "Frenemy" in English is an oxymoron, a blend of "friend" and "enemy". The word appears to have been officially coined in 1977 by the English writer Jessica Mitford.

mentioned, public universities have been widely questioned and attacked by conservative discourses for being spaces of training critical and creative citizens, spaces in which collectivity is prioritized. Meanwhile, hegemonic discourses seek to implode the collective dimension of the social sphere, eroding collective bonds and encouraging individualistic practices.

We can relate this idea to what Freud (1930/1996), when speaking about aggression directed toward one's fellow, one's neighbor, called the narcissism of small differences (*der Narzissmus der kleinen Differenze*). This notion unfolds as an inclination toward aggressiveness against an intrusive people or toward the creation of constant conflicts directed at those nearby. In the same way, political attitudes of exception take shape, since neoliberalism occupies a hegemonic position for movements of segregation, racism, inequality, and violence, in which otherness has no place except as that which threatens. As a result, the possibility of fraternal social bonds is emptied out, bonds founded on helplessness as a condition for the democratic social pact in a Freudian interpretation.

As we can see, the threats posed by the university to the prevailing power began with its very emergence, since, although in the beginning access to it was a privilege of the children of the nobility and later extended to an economic elite, its role was not restricted to serving these interests. Today, in the face of expanded access, the financialization of social bonds, and the neoliberalization of discourses, attacks are renewed and intensified under extremist governments, bringing to the fore the following questions: What is the place of the university? What is its role? How does the university produce and reproduce the reverberations of the contemporary sociopolitical context?

The University as a Field of Civil War

The quota policy for Black and Indigenous people, in aiming at historical reparation for marginalized original populations, brings to the surface repressed conflicts in the history of Brazilian society — conflicts that return in violent forms of racism, sexism, and through the patriarchal structure that still strongly shapes social relations in Brazil. In this way, the old colonial pact is renewed within the university sphere and aligns itself with the neoliberal management of social control.

Neoliberal rationality dismantles and prevents access to genuinely democratic means of struggle, reinforcing the attack on sociability itself and on the various forms of solidarity that underpin politics. According to Foucault (2015/1973), in *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège de France*, politics, far from putting an end to war, is itself the continuation of civil war. Dardot et al. (2021) draw attention to the fact that, in neoliberalism, civil war does not threaten power from the outside; on the contrary, it inhabits, permeates, and invests in "a matrix within which the elements of power operate, are reactivated, and dissociate" (p. 29).

From the understanding of this logic, we can consider how the quota policy has ended up producing the figure of the "internal enemy" (Dardot et al., 2021) within the university and society. It is not uncommon to hear complaints from individuals belonging to the so-called Brazilian elites regarding quotas, with arguments based on the alleged decline in the level of excellence of new entrants, as well as on the reduction in the number of spots available for elite youth. However, we know from various studies (Silva, 2022) that this argument does not hold, since even among those admitted through quotas, competition for entry into a public university is fierce, and their academic performance often surpasses that of those admitted through the general admissions process.

In this way, even identity-based struggles grounded in the discourse on freedoms and differences — whose relevance is indisputable — often end up heightening tensions and obscuring common struggles, the sense of equality, and solidarity. We evoke here the experience of the occupations of schools and universities in 2016, in response to Constitutional Amendment Bill 241 (PEC 241) and in defense of free, high-quality public education for all, on which we have previously worked (Coutinho & Andrade, 2017). At that time, in the occupations of universities, there was not as consistent a union among university students as was observed among high school students. The student movement within universities took place in a more fragmented manner, whether among different academic programs or among the various social and political movements present among students, as was noted by the students themselves (Aguiar, 2016).

Such fragmentation and polarization once again became evident in the pre-election periods of 2018 and 2022, reflecting the conflicts that also emerged in the Brazilian social landscape outside universities (Gallego, 2018). When attacks and reactions become hegemonic, it is because they run counter to the construction of critical thinking that is supposedly fostered

by the academic environment. It is as if the mechanisms that condition a civil war, a fratricidal confrontation, were installed at the very core of the university: "The civil war against equality and in the name of 'freedom' is without a doubt one of the main faces of current neoliberalism, when considered from the strategic angle" (Dardot et al., 2021, p. 27).

The university thus becomes a territory of disputes, now open and evident. There are disputes in the field of funding, where, on one hand, the discourse of productivism prevails, and, on the other, collective struggles grow for the preservation and attainment of the social rights of minorities that have become part of the student body and faculty. There are epistemological disputes, in which we witness the tension between colonialisms and decolonialisms, present both in research methodologies and in the theories and bodies of knowledge legitimized or not by the academic status quo (Marques et al., 2022). And finally, among other disputes, there are classist, sexist, ableist, and racist ones that go beyond the university space but are intensified there.

Some studies and publications already indicate the presence of suffering among students due to anxiety and academic demands, as well as financial and social insecurity in the face of the challenge of completing the degree program they enrolled in (Andifes, 2018; Maia, 2022; Santos, 2021; Silva, 2022). Concerns are frequent regarding family expectations about the performance of new entrants, who are often the first in their family to attend higher education.

Some of these complaints were heard within the scope of the previously mentioned outreach project — *From School to University: Listening to Malaise* (*Da escola à universidade: escutando o mal-estar*)[9] — which has been developed since 2019 at UFF/Niterói through workshops and conversation circles open to undergraduate and graduate students. In the sentences written and spoken by students in these spaces, the signifiers "pressure" and "failure" appear constantly, shifting from the pressure of the academic environment to family pressure: "*I feel anxiety and malaise about beginning to live new experiences and doing things for which I will be held accountable, including family pressure*" (E1[10]). "*I feel bad for not being able to meet the university's goals; failing to complete the tasks generates a feeling of guilt and failure*" (E2).

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[9] Project associated with the research approved by the Research Ethics Committee under CAAE No. 20131119.6.0000.8160.

[10] We will use the designation "E" followed by a number to identify the different statements made by the students who participated in the project, without identifying them by their proper names.

They also refer to the internal pressure that is reproduced within each individual: "I have a constant feeling that I will fail and that I am failing. A constant disappointment with myself for not being good at most of the things I set out to do" (E3). "Pressure to enter the job market, a sense of competitiveness with classmates in the program, a feeling of instability because you will never be good enough" (E4).

In one of the conversation circles held in 2022, remarks emerged about the fear of not being accepted in the group. A student mentioned the competition for the few scholarships available, stating that "it's a fight to see who is poorer" (E5). According to the student, such competition reveals how deeply market logic has penetrated the walls of the university.

A doctoral student present in one of the conversation circles said she feels like a "fraud" because she sees herself as lost when it comes to the theoretical depth required in the PhD program. A student in the Literature program understands that the position of self-sufficiency is always a demand from people and from the university itself: "to always be productive, cheerful, and optimistic" (E6). A mathematics student (E7) says he feels less intelligent than others because he is unable to get good grades as he did in high school. He speaks of the absurdity of witnessing a professor saying he is proud of failing many students. Taking the opportunity, his classmate comments that professors are very cold, especially those in the "exact sciences" (E8). However, he also mentions the lack of collaboration among students and that it is rare "when some have the audacity to join with those who struggle and help" (E9). In this conversation circle, we observed how frayed social bonds are in the academic environment, whether between professors and students or among the students themselves in terms of solidarity and horizontal relationships.

Here we return to the neoliberal logic combined with the rise of naturalizing scientific discourses as central to the production and management of a particular way of suffering (Safatle et al., 2021). This mode operates under a regime of attack on various forms of solidarity and, ultimately, has the effect of erasing the dimension of otherness (Birman, 2012).

In this sense, one of the aspects we understand as hindering the elaboration of young people's suffering is the depoliticization of the social bond. As anxieties are experienced in a privatized way, associated with chemical imbalances or, still, with individual problems, the social, systemic, and political dimension of young people's suffering is excluded. This mode of

suffering leads to the emptying of political practices of resistance that involve identifying external and social factors, in favor of the prevalence of a constant feeling of insufficiency and powerlessness. On this, Dunker (2021) remarks:

> This new narrative of suffering individualizes failure, in the form of guilt, without internalizing it in the form of conflicts. In doing so, it manages to completely isolate the political dimension of the objective determinations that attack our ways of life, reframing work, language, and desire in relation to psychic suffering. (p. 190)

The management of psychic suffering under neoliberal domination completely changes the rules, themes, and arenas of confrontation, producing an "internal colonization" of each country or institution (Dardot et al., 2021) through familialism and moralizing discourses that directly target science, the arts, and social bonds. In defense of global capital, states divert aspirations for equality and social justice toward motivations and emotions aimed at combating internal and external enemies, namely, inconvenient minorities, groups that threaten dominant identities, and traditional hierarchies.

Indeed, we can observe the presence of attacks on universities not only in the broader social sphere but also in internal conflicts and the presence of political violence, which reproduce civil war within the very territory of the university. This occurs both through prejudice and rejection toward newly arrived minorities and in confrontations between polarized political positions, as appears, for instance, in students' statements: *"Why am I treated differently in certain situations? … because they look at me strangely when I come to the university wearing flip-flops, whereas my white friends wearing flip-flops don't get such looks?"* (E10). *"Things that bother me at the university are the hatred, especially in the phrases spray-painted around campus, the intolerance in conversations, the one-sided positioning by faculty"* (E11). *"Being at the university is to resist and to occupy a place that is not used to my body"* (anonymous phrase written on a collective mural, April 2022).

In this context, we ask how psychoanalysis, as a critical theory in dialogue with the fields of education and politics, can contribute to a better understanding of the social symptoms present in what we are calling psychic suffering, and in particular, in the wave of increasing suicides and depression among university students (Gurski & Lo Bianco, 2023). One of our main premises in the dialogues we have established with the field of education has been precisely to show that psychoanalysis is not only a therapeutic approach — that is, its theoretical and

methodological body does not limit its intervention and effects to the individual sphere. Throughout its history, psychoanalysis has become part of the cultural heritage that helps us think, in a critical and subversive way, about problematizations of the social bond.

Dunker (2021) identifies as predominantly depressive suffering the situation in which the individual withdraws into themselves, becoming the target of self-attacks, without being able to take an active position of criticism toward the social discourses of which they are a victim. Could it not be precisely the return of this melancholization, produced amid neoliberal conditions, that presents itself in the form of self-inflicted deaths among today's youth?

Closing Remarks

In the initial discussions of the research, we highlighted the presence of structural racism as a cause of social problems for at least 300 years. Racism dehumanizes Black people and other minoritized groups and shapes our institutions as predominantly white spaces; we must acknowledge that the situation has been no different with universities.

Such conditions run counter to any democratic utopia, because a democracy is constituted on the premise that everyone holds the same status before the law, justice, and the State. In this sense, the dehumanization and non-inclusion of certain social groups in the civic life of the country have always hindered the construction of a truly democratic public culture, making it impossible to enjoy social respect as a public good for all (Gurski, 2023c).

In Brazil's recent context, in addition to the centuries-old coloniality and the immersion in a scenario shaped by the pace of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, we have witnessed an increase in intense attacks on educational agendas, human rights, minoritized groups, and democracy, with a virulence especially directed toward intellectual, academic, and political life.

It was amid this crucible of tensions that Brazilian society felt authorized and encouraged to demonize science, research, and intellectual and academic life, resulting from these incivilities in a regrettable process of erosion of the place and symbolic function of public universities within the social bond. In addition to this erosion, student and social policies aimed at young people have also dwindled. Since 2017, many students living in precarious conditions

have witnessed the dismantling of policies that, for a few years, had fostered their dreams of inclusion (Gurski, 2023c).

Therefore, aside from the historical difficulty of living with diversity in the academic environment, we are concerned about the rising number of student suicides, as well as the continuous increase in unfilled spots and enrollment dropouts in public universities. These concerns have led us to understand that there are issues in this context that need to be listened to more attentively.

Indeed, we cannot overlook the harmful effects produced for young people when the role of the university, as a space where dreams and utopias take shape, is called into question. At present, we are dealing with the slow cancellation of the future, an issue that impacts and shapes the modes of illness among youth (Fisher, 2020). It is from this perspective that we bring psychoanalysis into dialogue with other fields of knowledge, engaging with the sociopolitical dimension of psychic suffering. In other words, there is a clinical-political dimension of psychoanalysis that can contribute necessary reflections on psychic suffering in academic life.

This matters because, as previously discussed, self-inflicted death rates among young Brazilians have already become a public health issue. As previously noted, while global statistics over the past 20 years point to a decline in suicide deaths, Brazilian figures show an upward trend — a tendency also present in other countries of the Global South. In this regard, data on psychic suffering must also be examined through the lens of racialization. A study conducted by the Ministry of Health (2018) in the year 2018 showed that the risk of a young Black male committing suicide is 45% higher than that of a white youth of the same age group committing the same act. In other words, we need to decolonize discourses and practices related to mental health issues in the university.

The choice of education as a privileged field for a kind of civil war that, according to Dardot et al. (2021), would be incited by neoliberal practices and discourses must be addressed

by combating the neoliberal strategy of depoliticizing the educational field and privatizing sociopolitical suffering. In a scenario of overlapping crises, we have understood that the political dimension of imagination is also constructed through the instrumentalization of libido for political purposes (Fisher, 2020). In other words, instrumentalizing libido for political purposes stands as an act that runs counter to the encouragement of conditions for a matrix of civil war in social and academic interactions.

Finally, but no less importantly, it is necessary to understand that the meaning of life for young people is indeed associated with the ability to imagine and dream of new futures. In this sense, our paper concludes by opening new questions: In what ways can the difficulties surrounding the theme of the meaning of life, increasingly present in adolescents' accounts, be understood as a product of the neoliberal logic that operates a kind of spontaneous reduction of imagination, dreams, and utopias for new generations? What does the absence of the will to live among the youngest reveal about the choice of education, and especially universities, as a field of civil war?[11].

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[11]These questions are part of the Research Productivity Project (CNPq, 307623/2023-8) entitled "Adolescence, Oniropolitics, and Mental Health: Listening to Dreams as the Production of the Future in Times of Death Politics" (Gurski, 2023).

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