

# The Pandemic in Brazil: Normality as Necropolitics

Written by Leonardo Alexandre dos Santos, Tales de Paula Roberto de Campos and Vinícius Tavares de Oliveira

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On April 28<sup>th</sup>, when asked about the fact that Brazil had reached 474 daily deaths from coronavirus and 5,017 in total, President Bolsonaro said: “So what? I’m sorry. What do you want me to do? I’m a Messiah, but I don’t perform a miracle”. The president told journalists to question the Minister of Health, Nelson Teich, on the issue. This quote led to a discussion related to the ways of confronting the pandemic in Brazil. Instead of opting for policies that would lead to the reduction of infection cases, Bolsonaro claimed that prioritizing rigid measures of social isolation would lead to unemployment, economic recession, hunger, and misery. Based on this scenario, the main objective of this article is to analyze the policy developed by the Bolsonaro administration during the pandemic, taking into account the duality of health *versus* an economy that had been established by the Brazilian government.

### The Coronavirus Scenario and Brazil Facing the Pandemic

The first case of COVID-19 in Brazil was notified on February 26<sup>th</sup>, in the city of São Paulo, mobilizing the country to deal with the effects of the pandemic. Ten months after the beginning of the public health crisis, Brazil registered 178,995 deaths and roughly 6,7 million people infected. Amidst this scenario, the opposing discourses between the defense of economic reopening and the imposition of policies of social distancing have stood out in Brazil. In terms of health, the results of the failed policy of social isolation were calculated by the *Imperial College of London*: in May, the Brazilian states of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Ceará, and Amazonas were responsible for 81% of the country’s deaths, and state governments were acting in a discontinued manner through declarations of a state of emergency, voluntary quarantine, transport and school closures (Mella, Hoeltgebaum, Mishra et al., 2020).

The result of the lack of a centralized public policy to combat the pandemic is related to the personal refusal of the President, Jair Bolsonaro, to deal with the crisis as an urgent and central issue on the political agenda. The World Health Organization (WHO) is one of the President’s frequent targets as he accused the WHO of breaking up countries by promoting actions against the coronavirus.

The president’s primary concern has been with the country’s economic recovery. His statements often deny the need for the isolation of the population, favoring actions that help open trade for several companies. He even made a surprise visit with entrepreneurs protesting in front of the Federal Supreme Court (STF) building, for the reopening of the economy. In this event the delegation went to the headquarters of the judiciary, trying to put pressure on the judges, claiming that the isolation would lead companies to go broke.

In this sense, it is clear that Bolsonaro chooses and defends the discourse that the virus will deteriorate the national economy and opposes almost every research and speeches that indicate otherwise. Studies argue that despite the inevitable economic deficits caused by the emphasis on isolation policies, these measures that preserve society can be much less costly since the maintenance of lives precedes the functioning of the productive system. There is, however, a solution to this paradox, which consists in the actions of the State itself. The State entity has at its core the function of guaranteeing basic rights to citizens, such as social protection. In crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the recommendation for the State is to promote social policies that guarantee the survival of its citizens, making them respect social isolation and, consequently, flatten the curve of infections by disease.

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In the Brazilian case, Congress, with the support of opposition parties presented the proposal of the creation of an “emergency aid” to fulfill the State’s function of guaranteeing the means of survival to society, offering a resource of R\$600 (US\$120) to those who need it most for at least three months (it can reach a value of up to R\$1,200 or US\$240 in the case of unemployed mothers) (CAIXA, s/d). It is worth noting that the government presented an initial proposal that consisted of paying R\$ 200 (approximately US\$50).

Considering that constitutionally the nominal minimum wage the worker receives to guarantee his survival is R\$1,045 (US\$209), the R\$600 granted by the current government to face the pandemic is insufficient. Still, according to the Department of Statistics and Economic Studies (DIIESE), the minimum wage necessary for the survival of Brazilians should be (ideally) around R\$4,694 (US\$938), approximately 4 times more than what the constitution foresees.

The devaluation of the Brazilian worker’s labor and the discourse based on the superposition of the preservation of the economy over health conditions are not new and have their origins in the process of national formation. To discuss the subject, the next topic addresses how the perspective of slavery and elitism that permeates Brazilian society was constructed, and its effects in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Analysis of Brazilian Social Thought and the COVID Crisis**

Our central argument is that the current political and social thinking presented by the Brazilian president can be understood as a continuity of a process initiated with the formation of Brazil as a post-colonial state. The formal independence was not followed by a thought of what meant the past 300 years of domination and marginalization of several groups such as the enslaved and indigenous people. A clear evidence of this is that the country still maintained formal slavery for 66 more years, becoming one of the last countries to abolish the practice. And even when slavery was abolished, the same process of amnesia happened. The country never meaningfully engaged with a critical thought of what meant that period and what were its consequences for our society.

The coming of the Portuguese royal family to Brazil at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century allowed the imperial model to be replicated to the territory, which would gain its independence a few years later. The idea of a reign and the concentration of decision-making power in the hands of an individual presupposes what political science calls an “absolutist and patrimonial state”. According to the Brazilian anthropologist Sergio Buarque de Holanda, the patrimonial state creates solid structures and behavior patterns that consolidate a broad process of taking over the productive structures of the State by family elites (Holanda, 1995). In this political scenario, there is a confusion regarding the distinction between the public and private spheres, what is owned by the rulers, and what is rightfully owned by citizens (Fausto, 2015). In the COVID case the narrative of the president is embracing this idea of appropriating the public sphere to benefit the private sector since the federal executive power is only worried about the private companies that might go broke instead of strengthening the public health system to avoid death, suffering and chaos.

Since then, Brazilian politics has been a pact between elites to maintain the *status quo* about the distribution of wealth and the benefits of development. Although the country’s history has had moments when workers were valued in material terms, advances have failed to truly change political structures and how the country’s wealth is generated and distributed. The gains of the working class are therefore ephemeral and easily surmountable.

Bolsonaro was elected with a discourse on the resumption of traditional Brazilian politics and values in which the elites would dominate policy formulation. The concept of necropolitics is especially useful in this sense, especially in the light of Brazilian political and economic history, as we realize that the call to “return to normality” and the speech of opposition between health and economy privileges and protects the wealthiest while killing the marginalized and subaltern populations.

When observing the statistics of COVID-19 in Brazil it can be noticed that social class seems to be more decisive in the chances of survival of patients (Vespa 2020). This social risk factor is also confirmed on a global scale, according to the latest complete study published in the journal *Nature*.

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To understand the class dimension as an aggravating factor of coronavirus, we must understand Bolsonaro's government policy and classify it as necropolitical. Achille Mbembe develops this concept to understand the exercise of the sovereignty of the modern state through the decision of who should live or die.

The author argues that the concept of sovereignty produces norms made by free and equal men, who are subjects capable of reasoning. Reason and its exercise are equivalent to the exercise of freedom. Thus, the subject possesses total control and power of his own meaning, and therefore sovereignty is defined as a dual process of self-institution and self-limitation. The author is not concerned with using sovereignty in the struggle for autonomy and freedom, but as a way to instrumentalize human existence and the systematic destruction of bodies and populations (Mbembe, 2003).

Although necropolitics has been contemporarily associated by several analysts with the direct exercise of force to exterminate the undesired, this concept also operates through abandonment. Killing these people is, therefore, a function of a direct action of the State (through invasions in marginalized communities, for example) or also the complete abandonment of an individual who needs care and protection. This is where the policy of "back to normality" and the dichotomy between health and economy comes into play, and we can observe the dimension of class struggle in the fight against the pandemic. By arguing that Brazil should return to normality the president is not referring to a pre-COVID daily life, but rather to a situation where the elite can keep their businesses – while working from home – while the lower classes must face crowded buses, trains and streets to get to and from work. This narrative is then the clearest example of abandonment: this means that the government will not engage in policies that will actively protect the public and only those who can afford to pay for prevention (work from home, pay for private hospitals or private health insurances) will be able to take proper care or get proper treatment in case of COVID contraction. In this sense, the choice to advocate a return to normality means to return to the abandonment of lower-income subjects of Brazilian society.

The engagement in necropolitics is thus viewed either when an agent of the state (a police officer for example) effectively kills a marginalized/not desired other (black or indigenous people, *quilombola* communities and so on) or when the state does not provide enough means for these people to protect themselves against COVID in the case we analyze here. This can easily be viewed in the case where Bolsonaro vetoed 22 excerpts from a bill that provided measures to vulnerable communities. By not allowing public money to be used to fight COVID in indigenous communities, the abandonment has the consequence of the Brazilian government endorsing a possible genocide of these people.

Additionally, returning to normality or valuing the economy is not equivalent to encouraging growth and distributing wealth. Instead, it means abandoning the marginalized Brazilian population, since its role is to generate wealth for the dominant classes. The latter, in turn, are treated with full assistance from their private health plans or even by the possibility they have of social isolation. In affirming that the country will go broke if the isolation drags on for more months, Bolsonaro does not show concern for the workers or the traditionally marginalized population, but for the entrepreneurs who are having their ventures deteriorated. It is worth noting that the president spent many weeks until he issued any notes of sympathy or solidarity to the relatives of the people who died of COVID-19.

The very resistance in approving the emergency aid, or the proposal to pay US\$50 for each worker highlights this and confirms that the main concern is to avoid the collapse of the entrepreneurial elite and not the death of people. As we have argued, Bolsonaro chooses to kill the marginalized people during the pandemic, since he opts for the abandonment of working social classes as mentioned above, and lobbies for these people to risk themselves again to generate wealth for the elites.

### Conclusion

Since February 26<sup>th</sup>, Brazil became the epicenter of the pandemic in the world. In the midst of this social chaos, a discourse of return to normality and valorization of the economy to the detriment of health emerges, headed by the country's highest authority. This discourse sums up Brazil's social and political formation, as it exposes the contradictions of an essentially patrimonial and unequal country, as well as showing that the presidency of the

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republic once again chooses to abandon the marginalized population and sees more problems in the death of companies than of people. The contempt for public health can also be evidenced by the fact that the country has been without a health minister for more than 120 days.

Bolsonaro doesn't need to actively engage in the death of marginalized subjects (even though it has policies for active production of death), but rather it can just sit back and watch the virus consume and implement the plan to eliminate these subjects. It is with this idea in mind that we bring the concept of necropolitics of abandonment. It is a very sophisticated strategy of elimination of the marginalized and the undesired other as it can be easily denied. This, in fact, has been Bolsonaro's strategy as the president has systematically blamed state governors for the dramatic situation of COVID-19 in Brazil. It is also possible to see this strategy regarding the (lack of) development of a meaningful nationwide vaccination plan.

Understanding this idea of necropolitics of the abandonment might be imperative for undermining such policies as the COVID-19 crisis still unfolds but also to understand how state and entrepreneurial elites have constructed a narrative of self-made man for the poor while using state intervention to promote even further inequalities and suffering.

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