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Breathing as a political allegory: the COVID-19 pandemic in times of democratic expiration

A respiração como alegoria política: A pandemia da COVID-19 em tempos de expiração democrática

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**Abstract**

Using the respiratory categories proposed by the philosopher Franco Berardi as instruments for understanding power, namely: inspiration, conspiracy and expiration, the article analyses the Brazilian political-legal institutional response in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; Institutional crisis; Language and law.

Resumo

Valendo-se das categorias respiratórias propostas pelo filósofo Franco Berardi como instrumentos de compreensão do poder, quais sejam: inspiração, conspiração e expiração, o artigo analisa a resposta institucional político-jurídica brasileira no contexto da pandemia da COVID-19.

Palavras-chave: Pandemia de COVID-19; Crise institucional; Linguagem e direito.



Introduction ¹

This article was written by someone under quarantine due to the horizontal distancing policy² adopted by local public authorities as a way to flatten the epidemic curve of COVID-19 (coronavirus disease), an infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus type 2 (SARS-CoV-2). This new strain of coronavirus, first identified in the chinese city of Wuhan in late December 2019, although causing mild symptoms in 80% of cases, has raised great concern among health authorities since: (i) among the remaining 20% of patients, three-quarters experience a severe respiratory condition that requires oxygen therapy, and the remaining quarter faces critical situations that require assisted mechanical ventilation in a hospital environment (WHO, 2020); (ii) the disease's lethality rate has been around 4%, ten times higher than the virus that caused the pandemic influenza A (H1N1) of 2009 (VEJA, 2020); (iii) SARS-CoV-2 shows a high transmission rate, which made the World Health Organization (WHO) declare it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on January 30, 2020.

International experience has shown, especially in countries such as Italy, Spain and the United States, that there seems to be no state fully prepared to provide respiratory support for such a large number of infected patients. This is particularly true during the peak of the epidemic curve – which, by the way, justifies the attempt to flatten it through isolation policies as a way to reduce pressure on the health system. The public declarations made by hospitals and health organizations about the criteria for treatment priority in case of bed restrictions inevitably placed mechanical respirators, fundamental in the care protocol for critical cases, in the international social imaginary, a concept until then technical and restricted. Breathing, either protected by face masks in a preventive way or artificially supplemented in treatment, threatened by a disease for which there is still no vaccine or drug of proven efficacy, is no longer just a bodily function, but has rather become a category of analysis of the states' own capacity to act.

Not without reason, Mbembe (2020) defended the universal right to breathe as something that goes beyond the purely biological aspect of it. Since the hegemonic modernity is characterized by a ruthless war against living beings, the right to a breathable

¹ I dedicate this article to Maria Luiza de São José Rocha Pinheiro, whose death made the air thinner. I thank Edson Junio Dias de Sousa and Guilherme Campos Fonseca for the dialogic opening to the intuitions that preceded the reflections outlined here.

² "In the vertical distancing policy, only older people [and higher risk individuals] are distanced, whereas in the horizontal distancing policy all age groups adhere to social distancing" (DUCZMAL et al., 2020: 1).



life should thus be affirmed not only through recovering the world's natural sources of breath, since mankind and biosphere are indissociable, but also by overcoming any power structure that promotes the early interruption of living breath through necropolitics. Necropolitical states should however not be the only ones tackled, but any state that causes the lives of entire ethnic-racial groups to be precarious through an economy based on hegemony. This arrangement suffocates the individual through disintegrating collective resistance, or through keeping these populations out of breath through the unfair exploitation of their labor force. As the air knows no borders, such a right would not be restricted to specific state legal systems, but otherwise addressed at the universality of living beings, including the human person.

Even before this pandemic event, however, an Italian philosopher had already suggested the hypothesis of thinking about breathing as a political category. So impressed with the murder of black man Eric Garner, on July 17, 2014, in New York City, resulting of the use of police brutality by an officer who choked him to death, while the victim repeatedly mumbled "I can't breathe", as well as with the demonstrations that followed in several American cities, in which people chanted Garner's very last words as a motto, the thinker Franco Berardi began to reflect upon the political power not only of breathing, but of its different phases, identified by him as inspiration, conspiracy and expiration. This text will follow the same itinerary given by Berardi's partial categories in order to reflect on the social paths, especially those indicated in the political-legal field, which have been designed to confront the virus that causes COVID-19.

Inspiration: the hyper-inclusiveness of alternatives

The possibility of overcoming chaos does not rely on merit, but on the poetical act. To understand this construction by Berardi (2018: 19-22), it is necessary to return to the lyrical inspiration from which he commences, which is two verses taken from the poem « In lieblicher Bläue » by Hölderlin – « In lovely blue », in English. To Heidegger (1993: 249), in the German language, the idea of living and building originally shared the same signifier: *bauen*, deriving from the old term *buan* – words that should also be related to *bin*, the verb to be in the conjugations "I am, you are" (*ich bin, du bist*). Through a different path, Heidegger (2000: 75-76) had reached the same conclusion when he indicated that



the noun *wesen*, in its turn derived from the verb *sein* (to be), did not originally mean “whatness”, but “enduring as present”, in such a way that man is as he dwells on this earth.

Curiously, Agamben (2019), departing from Benveniste’s work, followed the same path in the Latin language. The verb “to inhabit” would be a frequentative of *habeo*, that is, “to have”. However, not all languages differentiate the verbs “to be” and “to have”, making use, in this case, of linguistic formulas that, with small variations, indicate a state – either that of being someone or that of possessing something. Therefore, the verbs “to be” and “to have” share a strong semantic proximity bond, which could be perceived through some of the words derived from *habeo*: skillful (ability to do something), habit (way of behaving recurrently) and inhabit, which, in the monastic tradition, bequeathed the expression *secum habitare*, that is a certain way of being and living regarding oneself. Living, then, would not only be the pragmatic action of residing in a place, but a particular ontological category, since the human, an inhabitant, remains in this world in its own way. Agamben’s argument, analyzing the Auschwitz concentration camp, designed by an architect trained at the Bauhaus, Fritz Erl, sought to question how modernity could have allowed an architecture based on the impossibility of housing; but, surely, the same reasoning can be applied to hegemonic spatialities that deny to the subaltern the possibility of a dignified permanence in the world.

Taking up Hölderlin’s verses, there are, therefore, two distinct movements in human life: that of meritorious action and that of poetic dwelling. Merit is related to the human trait of showcasing their own value, considering the parameter agreed upon by individuals in a given social context, and therefore receiving recognition, praise and reward (BERARDI, 2018: 19). Merit is based on a measurable intersubjective social and linguistic agreement, which makes it possible to foresee the action to be taken in order to obtain the expected reward. In the meritorious act, there is a level of predictability regarding the reaction of others due to a collectively accumulated and sometimes standardized semantic capital. Because it is based on strict ties between signifier and meaning, in the name of ordering efforts, the meritorious act leaves little room for the insurgent and the deviant, who need to be either framed or rejected for the sake of the mostly consensual meritorious control pact. The meritorious act guarantees legal security while order is maintained, but it does not seem to offer reliable alternatives when chaos obscures the horizon of expectation.



At this moment, experience seems not to be enough to provide quick answers – which not only promotes a rupture in historical time (KOSELECK, 2011; HARTOG, 2013), but also affects how man dwells in space. Although it was preceded by five other public health emergencies of international importance, namely, the influenza A (H1N1) pandemic, the international spread of poliovirus (still ongoing), the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, the congenital Zika virus syndrome and the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo, also ongoing (VENTURA et al., 2020: 6), the COVID-19 pandemic seems to cloud the predictability of social, political and legal reaction. Liberal traditions that praises individual's self-sufficiency are contrasted with imposing measures of “vertical” or “horizontal” distancing, calling into question people's ability to deal with the atomistic logic of social design; states that have historically been fair trade advocates and critics of piracy have renounced their own principles to either surpass the purchase price of contracts already signed between other governments for urgent medical supplies or to block shipment delivery of such products when they transit through their territories (DW BRASIL, 2020); labor and contractual legal institutes that have been perfected for decades are unable to offer adequate responses to defaults resulting from a stagnant economy due to the impossibility of the current flow of people, services and goods. The pandemic thus frays the limits of the meritorious act. The inspiration needed to overcome the unforeseen challenge can only derive from a poetical act.

“To live on this earth poetically” corresponds to a new measure of man facing the divine, nature, the unknown. Although the notion of measurement is usually linked to a quantitative and numerical issue, what is proposed is not a geometrization of experience, but the ability to place oneself between heaven and earth, between the unexpected and the experienced, redefining the very parameter of measurement. Poetically dictating is the way to place oneself between the finite and the infinite, enabling the inclusion of the strange within the familiar (HEIDEGGER, 1971: 220-226), through a measure that is not thought of as distance, depth, height or amplitude, but rather as our own relationship with the human being, understood not as an absolute and fixated essence, but as an event or an occurrence (BAMBACH, 2013: 5). The poetical act thus triggers unconventional meanings for already existing signifiers, becoming, at the same time, “a semiotic excess hinting beyond the limit of conventional meaning and simultaneously it is a revelation of a possible sphere of experience not yet experienced (that is to say, the experienceable)” (BERARDI, 2018: 21). The poetical act, based on a temporality of remembrance and



waiting (BAMBACH, 2013: 5), resumes historical time by pointing to a horizon of the possible, through the hyper-inclusiveness of alternatives that reveal themselves thanks to new possibilities of interpretation (BERARDI, 2018: 19-20).

But why should we say that the solution to the pandemic go through the poetical act? The mere establishment of the social, political, economic and sexual orders itself, by suffocating the vibrant bodies of individuals, already generates respiratory spasms, a situation in which the impossibility to breathe results from an exaggerated contraction of the body. The sensation of thin air that modernity generates results, then, from its high power of control and surveillance over social bodies, making use of a circuit of affections based on fear – a power that is always justified in order to avoid the label of normative arbitrariness. However, when chaos manifests itself, it is characterized by the inability to assign meaning to the flow of events and is perceived by individuals as panic, the subjective inscription in the chaotic occurrence itself. The COVID-19 pandemic has simultaneously and aporetically promoted chaos and the resurgence of order: on the one hand, the disease takes away the ability to extract meaning even from the event of death, which loses its singularity in mass burial graves and in the impossibility of face-to-face family mourning; on the other hand, it has demanded a maximizing action even from supposedly liberal governments, either through interventions in the economic domain, or by restricting individual freedom to come and go, generating an even more spasmodic contraction (BERARDI, 2018: 42; 2019: 223).

However, for Berardi (2018: 23-25; 2019: 220), it is at this moment that the poetical act manifests its chaosmic power, that is its ability to remodel the social rhythm, creating another inscription of subjects through unexpected processes of singularization. The poetical act is a breathing device: either in poetry or in cinema, the attempt to intervene in the breathing process of the listener/spectator is a way of making them remain in a counterintuitive temporality that allows them to open up to new possibilities of meaning – it is what Chklovski (1973) would call estrangement. The poetical act is, therefore, an inspiration, a way of discovering a new harmony with chaos, or departing from the language available to account for possible meanings until then inaccessible, thus creating ways of transforming order and concatenation of chaos. The poetical act is not an alienating breath, an escape from frightening reality; as Hölderlin reminds us, poetic living is earthly, material and concrete – it is its own *ethos*. It most certainly does not



magically impose itself against human will. The political-legal power's sensitivity to its inspiration can be decisive in the adequate response to the crisis.

Take the example of the Brazilian prison system. In 2015, the Federal Supreme Court had to rule a Claim of non-compliance with Fundamental Precept (ADPF 347 MC/DF), filed by the Socialism and Liberty Party (PSOL), on the unconstitutional state of affairs regarding the Brazilian penitentiary system. After pointing out that the overcrowding of prison facilities and the degrading conditions to which the incarcerated were subjected was incompatible with several conventional and constitutional precepts, the initial petition made several requests, including: the holding of custody hearings in the maximum period of 24 hours, counted from the moment of arrest, and that an end was put to the cuts on the National Penitentiary Fund – both granted in a precautionary measure; in addition to these, it requested an emphasis on precautionary measures alternative to deprivation of liberty, whose non-application in favor of provisional detention should be expressly justified; and, considering the severity with which sentences restricting freedom are served in the country, since prisons are much more inhospitable than the normative provision allows, it suggested giving preference to sentences alternative to imprisonment, softening the time requirement for regime progression and proportionally reducing penalties as a way of compensating the state tort – all of which were rejected.

However, when emergency situations in public health of international and national importance were triggered, the National Council of Justice³, taking advantage of the exceptionality of the pandemic, and also of the legal system's interpretation alternatives to edit the Recommendation no. 62 on March 17, 2020 in order to change the institutional rhythm of hyperincarceration. This document intends, among other measures, to reduce the incoming flow as well as the period of stay in the juvenile and adult prison systems during the exceptional context of COVID-19 through several recommendations. Regarding the juvenile system, for example, it suggested the reassessment of those detained in closed and semi-open conditions with the purpose of eventually progressing in the prison regime towards open conditions, suspension or remission; regarding the prison system, it recommended the reassessment of provisional

³ "The National Council of Justice (CNJ) is a public institution with the mission to improve the Brazilian judicial system, regarding administrative and procedural control and transparency" (Available: <https://international.stj.jus.br/en/Brazilian-Judicial-Branch/National-Council-of-Justice>; Access: 2021-07-27).



detentions, especially those carried out against people in situations of vulnerability, in overcrowded facilities or against those charged with non-violent crimes; as well as the granting of house arrest for all persons detained in an open and semi-open regime or with a suspected or confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19, among other measures. Somehow, five years later, even if provisionally, the legal institutionality of prisons had to hermeneutically rethink itself based on chaos.

The federal political power, however, still seems to be linked to the meritorious act. It is linked to an administration elected under public affirmations of low tolerance for crime⁴ and, at times, including attacks to the constitutional rights held by inmates, as the Ministry of Justice, through the Director General of the National Penitentiary Department, requested – unsuccessfully – the National Council for Criminal and Penitentiary Policy (CNPCCP) for the temporary suspension of the Basic Guidelines for Penal Architecture, so that it would allow them to use adapted metal containers to keep secluded both contaminated prisoners and those more susceptible to complications from the disease, such as the elderly, diabetics, as well as patients with hypertension and asthma (PAULUZE, 2020). Such guidelines were created by the Ministry itself in 2011, when the state of Espírito Santo was denounced by international organizations for maintaining tin prisons, consisted in metal containers whose internal temperature reached 50°C (122 F). It would not be inappropriate to relate this federal government intent with Agamben's criticism of Nazi architecture based on the impossibility of housing. After all, potentializing respiratory rarefaction already widespread in prisons, without adequate re-singularization alternatives in the midst of the pandemic, would be the very denial of the political right to inspiration.

Conspiracy: shared action

⁴ It is important to highlight that the fear that the pandemic would generate social lack of control and an increase in general crime rates has not become a reality thus far. In fact, available data seem to point to a reduction in the occurrence of property crimes. According to data from the Public Security Institute of the State of Rio de Janeiro [Instituto de Segurança Pública do Estado do Rio de Janeiro], there was a reduction in the rates of street theft (52%), car thefts (36%) and cargo thefts (46%). According to a survey by the Secretariat of Public Security of the State of São Paulo [Secretaria de Segurança Pública do Estado de São Paulo], there was also a reduction in the rates of theft (65%), car theft (36%) and cargo (46%). One cannot forget, however, the increase in cases of domestic and family violence against women (BERTONI, 2020).



Although potentially disastrous for specific groups of people, one of the most efficient secular strategies in overcoming chaos, that is, the inability to make sense of the disorderly flow of events, is the elaboration of a total explanation that links all events to a plan plotted on the sly by a conveniently chosen enemy. Regarding COVID-19, of course, the conspiratorial version that the Chinese Communist Party would have either produced the virus as a biological weapon or falsified data on its lethality in order to generate global panic and, consequently, obtain competitive economic advantages for allegedly keeping its industrial park in full swing while other countries paralyzed their activities gained some space in the circles supporting President Jair Bolsonaro (ORTELLADO, 2020). The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ernesto Araújo (2020), even stated that, after “climatism or climate alarmism, gender ideology, politically correct dogmatism, immigrationism, racialism (...), anti-nationalism, scientism”, the pandemic was proving to be the most convenient instrument for “globalism”, a supposedly revamped version of communism – the reason why everyone should beware of such an ideological threat, which he identified with the neologism “comunavirus”. As Ginzburg (2006: 53) recalls, the idea of a plot almost always generates others: “either true plots that tend to hegemonize it, or fictitious plots that tend to mask it, or even counter plots that tend to contrast it”. In this case, although the myth of the intentional Chinese origin of the virus has spread in some Western societies, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of China, Zhao Lijian, reversing the conspiracy’s direction, suggested that the US military was the one who secretly triggered the onset of the disease in Wuhan (CHIK and LEW, 2020).

Conspiracy theories are often disproved by science and the investigative media, among others. However, even when aware of its rebuttal, certain groups continue to disseminate it. In addition to indicating the cynical reason of an enlightened false conscience that, although aware of the innacuracy of the hypothesis, still sustains it (SLOTTERDIJK, 2001), this practice ends up serving political purposes in various ways: (i) as fabulation, interposing between the truth of facts and their representation by blurring reality, distorting data from experimental observation and contradicting the rules of logical reasoning; (ii) as cognition, by providing a total explanation for events that are disconcerting, unforeseen and have been excluded from the ordering official narrative; and (iii) as mobilization, by making the disperse energy of wrath or emancipation converge towards an intended common rupture (GIRARDET, 1987: 13). Despite its uses in the political field, one cannot forget that conspiracy theories also count with a series of



complementary ideas sustain its argumentative force, ideas that are refracted within itself and that can be accessed at convenience, such as: a providential view of history in reverse, in which Evil, in an articulated way, acts concretely behind the scenes of human events; a contradictory pessimistic anthropology, since it sometimes attributes to men the power to determine the course of events, and sometimes places them as mere instruments in the process of historical development; and an epistemological optimism, which claims the existence of an evident truth that, though unknown, needs to be unveiled (CASSATA, 2007: 18-21).

However, although the perception of conspiracy, as a reductionist causal explanation not necessarily proven, can be verified in the current context of the pandemic, Berardi prefers to reflect upon this category from the meanings present in its linguistic root. Etymologically, to conspire (*con-spirare*) means to breathe in a shared way. Not without reason, although using an analogy unusual at the time, first century AD, Columella called the musical harmony produced by a choir a conspiracy (*conspiratio*). In ancient Rome, the term did not have an inherent negative meaning, corresponding, in a generic way, to the union of men committed to the same purpose, regardless of the good or bad nature of the intent – distinct from conjuration (*coniuratio*), whose root indicates those who share an oath, a term that until the late Middle Ages was more commonly used to refer to a set of political crimes, such as: sedition, rebellion and treason, interchangeable criminal types depending on the city and the jurist (FREDONA, 2010: 10 -11; LANTSCHNER, 2015: 25).

Conspiracy, as shared breathing, can take on several features. At one extreme, it stems from a mandatory synchronization that nullifies the uniqueness of the personal rhythm for the sake of an automated breathing pattern imposed by a hegemonic power, whose origin is usually political or economic, although it can manifest itself in any relationship of collective domination. Fascism, for example, is a clear example of a political regime that establishes a hierarchically superior, binding and sanctioning biopolitical rhythm on a state level, to which everyone must adapt (BERARDI, 2019: 228). Capitalism, by establishing the metronome of economic competition, in which a non-cooperative posture prevails and equals the other to an adversary, causes each individual to seek synchrony with the abstraction of supposedly neutral and objective time of the clocks only, historically ordered according to the rhythm of commerce, industry and services (BERARDI, 2018: 74). But on the other hand, revolution is also a conspiracy, a moment



when personal singularities resonate in unison. Such common vibration does not derive from vertical impositions that efface singularities, but from a shared horizontal perception of a new meaning for the significant *society*, both as a latent reality and a future ideal, of which social movements are a good example (BERARDI, 2019: 221, 224). Between these extremes, there is a range of “con-respiratory” possibilities that have manifested themselves during the pandemic.

With the exception of the Turkmenistan dictatorial regime, which imposed social synchronicity by denying the existence of the pandemic, punishing anyone who made public use of protective masks or even the words coronavirus or COVID-19, mandatorily replacing them by the terms “disease” or “respiratory disease” in official publications and in the media (FIORATTI, 2020), states in general have adopted emergency measures to contain the spread of the virus or, at least, to slow down the peak of its epidemic curve. Administrative policies of increased social distance have led to the closing of schools, colleges, markets, offices, commercial stores. In more serious cases, lockdown policies have not only adopted such measures, but also restricted human displacement, authorizing it only for subsistence purposes, such as the purchase of food or medicine, and punishing those who violate them with administrative or criminal sanctions. In both, however, there is a change in the social rhythm, an imposition that lives be ordered under another temporality. The parents’ remote work schedule needs to be reconciled with the demands of distance education for their children. Business meetings, academic events and even government deliberations are now taking place on virtual platforms through webinars. The impossibility of circulation in the streets, by recommendation or prohibition of the public and health authorities, makes people breathe together, full time, the rhythm of the house. At the same time, without any imposition, there were public examples of solidarity showcased from a distance: in Italy, the images of neighbors singing songs at the end of the day, each from their homes, to distract and encourage each other soon became famous (FOLHA, 2020); in Brazil, there were countless examples of neighbors who, even though did not know each other, sang happy birthday to people who celebrated the date in isolation.

In addition to the breathing spontaneously shared between citizens or imposed on them by public entities, the one observed among Brazilian states in the course of combating the pandemic, even if against the federal government's will, deserves a highlight. Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro, who has even denied the existence of the virus,



has ever since the beginning of the pandemic held a position contrary to strict “horizontal isolation” measures. Often referring to the disease with disdain, calling it a “little flu”, sometimes underrating its lethality, accusing the press of fomenting a certain “hysteria”, and eventually affirming its risk was restricted to those with additional health conditions and lacking physical fitness. These rhetorical strategies, lacking any scientific data to support them, put him on a collision route with his former Health Minister, physician Luiz Henrique Mandetta, since the president ended up defending the free course of economic activities instead of a strategy to fight the disease. At one point, he even proposed that a version of the *Milano non si ferma campaign* be held in Brazil – even though it was recognized by the mayor of Milan and supporter of the strategy, Giuseppe Sala, as a mistake (IL POST, 2020) – with the motto “#OBrasilNãoPodeParar” (#BrazilCannotStop), which it was only judicially suspended thanks to the granting of a precautionary measure by Luís Roberto Barroso, minister of the Supreme Court, in the context of two concentrated constitutionality control actions (ADPFs 668 and 669), proposed, respectively, by the National Confederation of Metalworkers (CNTM) and by the Sustainability Network Party (REDE).

In March, when community or sustained transmission began to take place in national territory, an expressive group of governors, without any unifying federal orientation, adopted, in a short period of time, state measures to isolate the population, following the World Health Organization's recommendations. The legal support for such measures came from the STF in the injunction granted by Justice Marco Aurélio in the Direct Action of Unconstitutionality (ADI) n. 6341. Although it declared the constitutionality of Provisional Measure n. 926, of March 20, 2020, promulgated by President Bolsonaro – which provided for procedures for the acquisition of goods, services and inputs to fight the pandemic, as well as reinforcing the legitimacy of the federal government to discipline emergency measures – the injunction reaffirmed the common administrative and legislative competence concurrent with Federated States in matters of public health. This monocratic decision was eventually reaffirmed, with slight modifications that made it even more explicit, by the plenary of the Court.

It is not unknown that, at times, the governors acted in a coordinated manner: 24 of them, for example, soon after the granting of such precautionary measure, addressed a public letter to the President of the Republic requesting, among other things, the suspension of State's debt payment with the Union and several institutions such as the



Federal Savings Bank (Caixa Econômica Federal), the Bank of Brazil (Banco do Brasil), the Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES), as well as debts contracted with international organizations, for a period of 12 months, as well as the federal government financial support for the acquisition of equipment and supplies necessary for the preparation of beds, assistance to the population and protection of health professionals (TURTELLI, 2020). Nonetheless, the practically simultaneous action in combating the pandemic, using largely similar measures, adopted against federal government guidance, represents a revolution within the traditional institutional accommodation of the federative pact, a randomly synchronized action to retake state's autonomy, a shared breath between collective public actors.

Expiration: the suicidal state

Among the three “respiratory categories” that Berardi works with, the definitive expiration, as a complete experience, is the most difficult to be reached through language. First, because death, the completion of the expiratory process, does not generate a first-person testimony. As indicated by several concentration camp survivors, only the victim who died at the hands of the Nazis could be the full witness to the horror – which made the survivors' reports a mere record of a fault (AGAMBEN, 2008: 27, 42-43). Furthermore, because although Western modernity intended to fracture the Christian doctrine, it ended up giving way for the rise of other progressive philosophies of history that began to function as secular theodicies, capable of vilifying the past in order to exculpate the present and indicate a promising future (BEVERNAGE, 2015: 350-351). Modernity thus encouraged the utopia of immortality, the promise of future progress – and capitalism, in turn, became the realization of this utopia (BERARDI, 2019: 226). Finally, because the political-juridical field, in the name of caution, increasingly intended to be the space for reversibility: with the proposal of rational penalties, the renouncing of the death sentence as a definitive solution, the new encouragement for the rehabilitation of the incarcerated; emergency reliefs of an anticipated nature had their concession restricted to situations subject to reversal; the legislative will of the present, except for the matter incurred in the immutable clauses, used its powers to revoke other wishes that were prior to it, guaranteeing the effectiveness of the democratic alternation (BERARDI, 2018: 121).



It so happens, however, that this tripod has been gradually undermined by a new zeitgeist. The numerical increase in the world population and the *per capita* exploitation of natural resources would have transformed humanity into a geological force of its own, giving rise to the proposal to recognize a new era named Anthropocene. Beginning in the late 18th century with the creation of the steam engine, the Anthropocene would have ended the previous geological period known as the Holocene, which appeared approximately ten or twelve millennia ago with the end of the glacial period (CRUTZEN and STOERMER, 2000: 17-18). In an article published in the beginning of the 21st century, Crutzen (2002), one of the proponents of the new periodization, suggested that humanity would continue to be a preponderant environmental force for millennia, unless it was surprised by a global catastrophe: a meteorite, a world war or a pandemic, for example. Regardless of the impact that COVID-19 may have on Crutzen's proposal, the idea that the unsustainable action of man was able to trigger a new geological era spilled over to other areas of knowledge. Irreversibility would thus not only characterize the consequences of the irresponsible action of man in the environment, verifiable by the extinction of species, melting of the poles and global warming, but it would also support a new methodology gradually generated by the numerous processes, ideologies and disastrous social projects of the Anthropocene and made evident in recent years (BERARDI, 2018: 120).

In the political field, the new logic of the irreversible would have compromised the socially shared consensus that democracy, in its possibility of alternation, could overcome social inequalities by correcting the political route guaranteed by successive elections. In several countries, in fact, irreversibility has come to be considered key to understanding the feeling of public humiliation shared by different social groups (BERARDI, 2018: 126): on the liberal middle class' side, the irreversible loss of the narrative of the self-sufficient and personally responsible man that manages to subsist independently of the state assistance policies (SCHRAM, 2015); regarding conservative groups of Christian inspiration, the irreversible "degradation" of social values, a perception resulting, most often, from the recognition of legitimate rights of vulnerable people due to ethnic-racial, gender and/or sexual orientation issues; on the part of the marginalized populations, the irreversible necropolitics arising either from the state's indifference to the parallel power of the drug trade and the militias, or from the brutality typical of certain public security policies. In many cases, the gradual suffocation of social



groups, diverging in their demands, but united by the perception of institutional insolubility, led to an attempt at democratic suicide, the expiration of the establishment, manifested by the electoral victory of governors such as Duterte, Erdogan, Trump and Bolsonaro (BERARDI, 2019: 227).

Taking that into consideration, what emerged as a social revenge on the State's immobility became a self-destructive management project. Ultimately, fascism is a less totalitarian than suicidal state since instead of "closing all possible escape lines", it "supports itself on an intense escape line", transformed into a "line of pure destruction and abolition". Not without reason, knowing of his imminent defeat in World War II, Hitler issued Telegram 71 – "if the war is lost, let the nation perish" – which ordered the extinction of his own people through a final scorched earth strategy that would annihilate the resources that still existed in Germany itself, such as drinking water, food, fuel (DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 1996: 113-115). Even though they have not reached the terminal stage of the suicidal state, administrations that have recently emerged from the irreversibility of social disappointment seem to be on their way, as they merge "the management of death among sectors of their own population" with permanent and risky flirtation with its own institutional destruction, becoming "the continuous perpetrator of its own catastrophe" (SAFATLE, 2020: 227-228). In Brazil, this has become increasingly evident with the pandemic.

Dissatisfied with the *conspiratio* of the governors, the shared breath of administrative policies of increased social distancing indicated by the states of the Federation, President Jair Bolsonaro started to adopt suicidal measures. Public services and essential activities, whose exercise and functioning must be protected against the extraordinary measures adopted to face the public health emergency of international importance caused by SARS-CoV-2, must be listed by the President of the Republic of Brazil by decree, according to Law no. 13,979 of February 6, 2020. It happens, however, that in the arm wrestling with the governors, supported by the understanding of the Federal Supreme Court regarding the common administrative and legislative competence of Federated States in matters of public health, Jair Bolsonaro has continuously expanded the list of such services, including some that do not seem to have any essential character. An example is that, after a first listing regulated by Decree n. 10,282, of 03.20.2020, "religious activities of any nature" were additionally considered essential, as well as



"beauty salons and barbershops" by Decree n. 10,292, dated 03.25.2020, and, finally "sports gyms of all types", according to Decree n. 10,344, dated May 8, 2020.

In addition to the suicidal legislative action, which grants the character of essentiality to random activities, without prior presentation of a national plan for the distension of social isolation measures capable of facing the actions of local governments in a scientific and strategic way, two other manifestations of federal self-sabotage can be observed: that of official propaganda and the performative acting of the head of the Executive Power itself. In the first case, replacing the judicially suspended “#OBrasilNãoPodeParar” campaign, the Secretariat of Communication of the Presidency of the Republic claimed that the government's actions aimed at saving lives and jobs, finishing off with the phrase: “work, union and truth will set Brazil free”. If the attempt to once again undermine social distancing administrative policies was not enough, such a catchphrase – if considered among the rhetoric used by various members of the administration, since the speech given in January 2020 by former Secretary of Culture, Roberto Alvim, who bore a lot of resemblance to historical speeches given by Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, or the recent comparison made by Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo between the quarantine resulting from COVID-19 and the Nazi concentration camps – ended up being associated with the motto posted at the entrance to Auschwitz, “work sets you free”, provoking a reaction from several members of the Jewish community, including Michel Schlesinger, rabbi of the São Paulo Israeli Congregation (Congregação Israelita Paulista) (FELLET, 2020), and further fraying the already social fabric already compromised by political polarization.

Finally, Jair Bolsonaro himself has adopted a provocative behavior regarding social distancing measures in the Federal District, premeditatedly disregarding them, sometimes going for coffee in bakeries or riding a jet-ski, other times encouraging or taking part in demonstrations of support for his government and criticism of the Legislative and Judiciary powers. The suicidal character of such actions is statistically proven. The demonstrations in favor of the Bolsonaro's administration that took place on March 15th this year, organized by the Advance Brazil Movement [Movimento Avança Brasil] had an immediate impact on the COVID-19 transmission rates, as it is possible to verify that, both in cities where such events took place, and in municipalities that, despite not having registered any public movement of support, made, in the 2018 elections, a majority option for the current president, the epidemic curve in the first fortnight



following the demonstrations was higher than in other cities (MARIANI et al., 2020). Bolsonaro's leadership makes his supporters – and, as a result, the municipalities in which they reside – more subject to contagion, especially as they are encouraged to ignore state recommendations for smoothing the peak of the epidemic curve. Berardi (2019: 222-225) argues that such self-destructive social behaviors, questionable even from a scientific viewpoint, are characteristic of expiratory moments. Just as the individual, in an asthmatic crisis, does not have enough energy to maintain, at the same time, its bodily movements and intellectual capacity, democracies in processes of suicidal expiration would be doomed to only one of two options: walking slowly, giving up from the quick promises of developmentalism, or compromising the capacity for complex reflection that takes the distinct objective variables of reality into account. Apparently, Brazilian democracy has been dealing with different and mutually exclusive solutions taken by its public managers in the context of the pandemic, which only makes institutional asphyxia even more chronic.

Conclusion

Making conclusions about one's own time is necessary, even if doing so implicates admittedly precarious conditions. It is on the outline of the first syntheses that some consistent knowledge can be produced in the long run. In this article, using Berardi's respiratory categories, the attempt is to track (i) the divergent responses to the pandemic, sometimes based on meritorious deeds, sometimes on poetic dwelling (ii) the dispute between the imposition of a personalistic breathing by the federal government and the emergence of socially shared breathing by public authorities, both local and scientific policies, and (iii) the threat of a suicidal expiratory awareness encouraged by the President of the Republic of Brazil and embraced by its supporters. These final considerations are an attempt to think of new shareable meanings about the signifier democracy, increasingly worn out.

After all, the pretense of control under any political regime is always an illusion, as it is based on the selection of some variables that are regulated, given the ocean of ungovernable chaotic matter that surrounds it. But it is in the production of a meaning shared by society that the success of political institutions resides. Meaning is not a



presence, but an experience (BERARDI, 2018: 145). Thus, on the abyss of meaning of the current pandemic chaos, the possibility of reaffirming democracy and, in particular, the democracy of care or well-being, involves the appreciation of social narratives related to the Unified Health System [SUS, Sistema Único de Saúde], to social assistance, the work of health and education professionals, the visibility of domestic activities, the perception of the precariousness of the supposed self-employed work linked to home delivery applications.

Regarding the State's institutionality, the redesign of the federative pact resulting from the federal omission in the fight against the pandemic can serve to limit the hyper-presidentialism that has historically characterized the Brazilian government system. According to medical and health authorities, the requirement that death certificates correctly reference the cause of death not only meets the need to register the present time and the right to memory of the deceased and their families, but also corresponds to an inspection possible in the current context, aimed at a state that tolerates or promotes disappearance policies, of which the underreported deaths of COVID-19 and the reactivation of peripheral cemeteries as mass grave devices are current examples (BARBOSA, 2020).

Finally, social isolation, digital overload on work activities and intersubjective relationships and the impossibility of urban mobility may be the key to a new circuit of affections (SAFATLE, 2015), capable of influencing both subjects in their individualization processes as the political body itself. The liberatory imagination of the future, capable of inspiring a new poetic life, involves the reactivation of the general intellect's erotic body. "[Social] movements have always been the activation of an erotic body, enabling the brain to imagine things that did not exist yet" (BERARDI, 2019: 229). The post-pandemic society needs to seek a new bodily way of life, which includes the various possibilities of different-sex affection, as a way of putting an end to the stifling march that the political-economic systems have bequeathed to us. The quarantine is a mere radicalization of the compartmentalized life that modernity had already implemented. Socially sharing another pattern of breath is the possible revolution of vulnerable bodies whose mere visibility in public space is already a transformative act. Otherwise, there won't be much to look forward to from the democratic expiration we've already gone through.



Translation

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