


Mortal inequalities: the fabrication of precarious lives in Brazil

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Perhaps the most important aspect of a debate are the movements made by the interpellations that it evokes, whether these are points of agreement or critique, additions, observations of something lacking, or other perspectives that arise indicating paths that previously had not been considered. In this text, we aim to point out some of these movements. All of the debaters agree, along with the authors of the base text, that the universal right to healthcare and education has been deconstructed through the actions of anti-egalitarian movements articulated through a political alliance that rose to power in Brazil's 2018 elections.

Mario Pecheny argues that this is not simply an anti-egalitarian movement, but that, above all, it is an attack on the public good. Keila Deslandes ponders the protagonism of emotions and affects in collective adhesion to this movement against public policies. Wanderson Flor do Nascimento emphasizes the intersectional character of the base text which – according to him – is a prerequisite to understanding the form in which subalternized people will be affected. Luma Nogueira de Andrade highlights the dimension of sexuality and gender at the

beginning of the Bolsonaro administration. Each author, in his or her own way, brings elements to help to understand the conditions of those whose existence depends – more so than other segments of the population – on access to universal, free public policies to guarantee their lives and their conditions for demanding recognition and rights.

Anti-egalitarian people destabilize the public ideal of a universal right to healthcare and education as values. Instead, they consolidate a new form of “neoliberalism” which, according to Pecheny, is more radical and harmful than that which Latin American societies underwent during the 1990s. The current political context corrodes values of equality and universality in such a way as to render the conception of public good more fragile. It is a political and cultural phenomenon that demonstrates an advance of individualization and competitiveness, proposing privatization in areas previously considered to be of common interest, and that therefore ought not to be organized in accordance with market-based principles.

In the conflict between anti-egalitarians and those who support subalternized people, the most visible attack has been in relations of power in the sphere of gender and sexuality. Flor do Nascimento questions this centrality, an understandable position when faced with this government’s proposals, which threaten Brazil’s social security network. However, it is possible to think of Bolsonaro and the movement that uplifts him as a “myth” as denying equality of gender and sexuality, a denial materialized through moral grammar that acts upon the areas of education and healthcare, yet still interferes – even if indirectly and less visibly – in other public policies.

Feminist and LGBTI+ demands for recognition and equality generate ontological uncertainties, especially for heterosexual men, inasmuch as they disseminate a form of questioning the sexual-gender order that has settled in masculine power, reproductive heterosexuality, and gender binarism. Achieving rights and policies for historically vulnerable groups has bothered historically privileged people, but it has also contributed to the form in which sexual politics spread in everyday micropolitics of reaction to previously accepted behaviors and attitudes.

The role of social networks is ambiguous. They have allowed feminist, LGBTI+, and ethnic-racial agendas to grow in popularity, increasing the visibility of these groups and the support for their demands of equality. Yet this popularization has been framed by the individualism of networks in which, instead of the personal becoming political – as in the old feminist axiom – politics became personal, creating practices of virtual vigilance, persecution, denunciations with very real consequences in the lives of uncountable people.

These networks have also allowed for radical responses, creating conflicts and mass protests, and opening paths for far-right ideologies and their anti-egalitarian followers to achieve electoral victories. It is not by chance that traditional means of communication and universities are among the most important targets of persecution and attack. Social networks have automatized the public sphere, disseminating a horizontal organization which – propagated by Silicon Valley’s oligopoly as being “democratic” – has, in fact, had anti-democratic effects in flattening public debates. The automatized public sphere reduces debates to a confrontation among equivalent perspectives, placing opinions based only on immediate observations at the same level as those derived from facts (journalism) or from evidence (science).

The Escola sem Partido (School Without [Political] Parties) legal project threatens intellectual freedom and delineates a denial of critical freedom and of scientific theory and discovery. This attack, orchestrated by social networks, the vigilance and persecution of academics, and political actions and investigations against institutes of higher learning, threatens the republican role of education in the continuous development of democracy.

As we noted in the text that initiated our debate, actions in the area of healthcare are focused primarily on making Brazilian National Health System (SUS) unviable. Bolsonaro's choice of a Health Minister who, over the course of several decades, has been linked to private healthcare interests, corroborates the government's intention of implementing a model that withdraws from the principles of universality, equity, and completeness. The minister of the Woman, the Family, and Human Rights reinforces the redirection of healthcare and education policies against the necessities of LGBTI+ people, as well as against sexual and reproductive rights as a whole.

There are strong emotional and subjective components in the construction of the alliances of anti-egalitarian groups against universal access to healthcare and education, as we learn from Deslandes. Even if we were to identify the political and economic interests behind the attacks on these public policies, social adhesion to the anti-egalitarian agenda occurs at least in part through tremors and uncertainties. Many people who support the alliance that is currently in power will be harmed by its agenda, in an apparent contradiction that unravels when we see that their expectations are that those elected will protect them from supposed threats. These threats may be old and revived by these groups – as is the case of Communism – or they may be new, such as the demands for equality and recognition that are presented as supposed “gender ideology”¹.

The social fears that the anti-egalitarian alliance uses to sow support for its agenda uses moral grammar as a platform to institute a tyranny of the obvious that justifies certain sectors of the population combating social policies like Bolsa Família and affirmative action programs. These polemic debates in the public sphere show how certain privileged social strata seem incapable of sympathy and solidarity toward those from whom they aim to distance and distinguish themselves, such as poor people, Black people, queer people.

In terms of education, the denial of critical thinking – which is requalified as “indoctrination” – and the attempts at vigilance and punishment of educators scarcely disguises the desire for cognitive comfort, which can only be reached through a tyranny of the obvious in which banal and unreflective phrases like “boys wear blue and girls wear pink” become unquestionable truths, as Andrade and Deslandes note. Attacks against universities and educators at all levels as potential indoctrinators engender proposals for a supposed neutrality in education and science which, in and of itself, is already ideological. Flor do Nascimento emphasizes that this supposed “neutrality” scarcely hides complicity with the status quo in favor of inequality.

Changes in hierarchies of gender and sexuality generate campaigns on social networks that take on the format of moral crusades. Such was the case with the crusade, initiated by Bolsonaro when – in reaction to the legal recognition of same sex civil unions by Brazil's Supreme Court in May, 2011 – he turned his attention against the distribution of anti-homophobia materials in schools, which he nicknamed the



“Gay Kit.” What began as homosexual panic became a larger moral crusade in the campaign against the introduction of a gender perspective in the National Education Plan and its state and local equivalents between 2014 and 2016. It was this context that allowed the specter of “gender ideology” to be disseminated on a national scale, and in which the fear of Communism and defense of the old military regime began to be revived.

Bolsonaro transformed himself into a so-called “myth” by catalyzing this process on social networks, making explicit prejudice and discrimination against homosexuals, Black people, indigenous people, and women. It is not by chance that his administration crystallized the alliance between more conservative religious sectors, neoliberal economic interests, soldiers from the armed forces, and a segment of the judiciary linked to anti-corruption Operation Carwash. These groups shared a common objective of taking control of the state and, thereafter, of public policies, an objective that was only possible through the construction of a moral platform capable of raising public support. As such, they campaigned without completely showing their agenda to dismantle the state and its social policies; instead, they capitalized on the dissatisfactions and fears of public opinion affected by the economic crisis, indignant at corruption scandals, or simply opposed to inclusive social policies.

The anti-egalitarian alliance managed to catalyze hatred and indignation against the state, the corruption that supposedly characterizes it, and the public policies that certain social segments considered to attend to others but not to themselves. The response, however, will not (only) be moral, but rather directed toward dismantling the state and the public sector so as to benefit the market. It is a path of disintegration that reduces citizens to consumers in competition with each other, and with unequal access to everything: income, healthcare, education. These inequalities amplify the vulnerability of historically subalternized groups like LGBTI+, indigenous, Black people, and women, negating their right to life and to human dignity. In the kingdom of inequality, humanity becomes a privilege, and many people are relegated to sub-citizenship, to violence, and – at the outer limit – to extermination.

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