

## DECOLONIZING THE PRECARIAT WITHIN THE PANDEMIC: Covid-19 versus Human Sciences

DECOLONIZAR O PRECARIADO EM MEIO À PANDEMIA: Covid-19 versus Ciências Humanas,  
DECOLONIZAR EL PRECARIADO EM MEDIO DE LA PANDEMIA: Covid-19 versus Ciencias Humanas

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### ABSTRACT:

This work aims at defending the relevance of decolonial thinking towards overcoming the current and future consequences of the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is an attempt to demonstrate the relation between the lack of acknowledgement of the Human Sciences, especially concerning decolonial thinking purposes, and the catastrophe that falls on Brazil during the current pandemic. The underlying theoretical framework combines historical and sociological guidelines, complemented by recent news on the pandemic's progression in Brazil. It is argued that leaving Human Sciences behind in order to allegedly prioritize investments in Biological Sciences is nothing more than a trap by the public authorities.

**KEYWORDS:** Covid-19; decolonial thinking; Human Sciences; Education.

### Introduction

This work aims at demonstrating the importance of decolonial thinking in overcoming the current and future consequences of the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Thinking 'decolonially', however, is only possible after understanding the sociohistorical conditions that pervade the Brazilian reality.

The first section revisits the history of the yellow fever epidemics in Rio de Janeiro during 19th century as told by historian Sidney Chalhoub (2017), to conduct the reader towards recognizing some similarities between the public authorities' stance then and now.

The second section covers the globalizing colonial movements since the establishment of race as a category. The third section discusses the situation of Brazilian workers during the pandemic, focusing on the category denominated precariat. The fourth section attempts to defend decolonial thinking as a possibility against the banalization of life.

Lastly, the section Closing the circle advocates the appreciation of Human Sciences as the only possibility to endure the colonial logics that refrains us Brazilians from seeing the core of our own problems.

### **Politics for epidemics in the Empire of Brazil and in contemporary Republic**

Rio de Janeiro faced its first great yellow fever outbreak in 1850. The disease had traveled by sea from New Orleans, in the US, striking the Cuban capital Havana and reaching Salvador in September 1849 (Chalhoub, 2017). About three months later, the government admitted there might be some cases of yellow fever in the country, because it was very present in the Caribbean at that time, but the Imperial Academy of Medicine soon spread the news that the disease was benign. When a committee to investigate its real conditions was created in January 1850, the plague was already out of control in Rio. The first quarantine regulations came only in February, that is, almost five months after the disease first arrived in the country. The number of cases began to flatten in May and in July there were no new cases of yellow fever (Chalhoub, 2017).

In the 1870s, however, there were new yellow fever outbreaks in Rio de Janeiro. Fighting the disease was crucial to stimulate European immigration to Brazil, and this became the perfect reason to implement hygienist policies. The emerging black city of Rio and its tenements represented a major inconvenient for the white middle class in those first years after the abolition of slavery – both for the persisting imagery of black people around, where it could not be forgotten, and for the fact that tenements consisted in large crowds within restricted spaces, which facilitated the transmission of diseases.

Chalhoub (2017) shows how quickly the poorest were labelled as dangerous while the yellow fever went on spreading, on one side, and on the other side, how unimportant it was considered to fight other diseases, when the amount of black people infected by them was higher than the amount of white people.

Such hygienist policies, consisting in nothing less than explicit attempts to whiten the population, culminated in the destruction of the legendary tenement Cabeça de Porco in Rio, the national capital back then, on the 26th of January 1893. After its eviction was unsuccessfully demanded by the authorities, the tenement was demolished during the night, much to the despair of the residents. The mayor Barata Ribeiro was acclaimed for “wiping that dirt off the map” (Chalhoub, 2017, p. 20), under the excuse of building a tunnel where it was located. The tunnel was only ready in 1922, as Carlos Sampaio, the engineer who had been hired to carry out the work back in 1891, was in charge of the city hall.

## Race and coloniality

If racism against the black population was openly institutionalized in the end of the 19th century, given the character of novelty of the first policies in favour of former slaves who had been brought in from Africa, there is nowadays a series of governmental and non-governmental organizations that address the promotion of black people's rights in Brazil. A noteworthy example is the Cultural Foundation Palmares, created in August 1988, "the first public institution dedicated to promoting and preserving the cultural, historical, social and economic values brought as an influence of the black people into the formation of Brazilian **society**"<sup>1</sup>.

On the other hand, the Foundation's current president, Sérgio Nascimento de Camargo, puts racism into a doubtful perspective, opposes to celebrating the Black Awareness Day and does not acknowledge Zumbi dos Palmares as a black leader, even though the Foundation was named after him. Camargo was once removed from the position by Justice for two months (RODRIGUES, 2020), but as he came back in February 2020, he managed to fire "black people with prominent trajectory in public policies in favour of the African-Brazilian culture" and even asserted himself it was necessary to "form a new extreme-right team" (BATISTA, 2020).

The reproduction of racism by a member of Bolsonaro's administration is far from surprising any of its opponents or supporters. However, the same line of thought being followed by a member of a social and economic minority in Brazil reflects precisely how successful the racialization project has been: as long as a member of an oppressed group is not aware of belonging to a such group, they can do nothing to change their own situation.

Amongst the many possible ways to analyse this phenomenon, I opt for the decolonial perspective. Its general lines are presented in the following paragraphs.

Mignolo (2011) stands for the decolonial option as opposing to globalization's homogenizing purposes, considering globalization as a project to impose the recognition of Western – that is, European – achievements supported by the Renaissance mentality.

Coatsworth (2004) distinguishes four great globalization cycles. The first one took place between 1492 and the early 1600s, and "witnessed the conquest and colonization

<sup>1</sup> Description from the Cultural Foundation Palmares' official website. Available under <[http://www.palmares.gov.br/?page\\_id=95](http://www.palmares.gov.br/?page_id=95)>. Accessed on 27/05/2020.

of American societies by Spain and Portugal and the creation of a vast trans-Atlantic trading system" (Coatsworth, 2004, p. 38). The second cycle began in the late seventeenth century with a second wave of European colonization, included the development of slave colonies in North America and ended with a series of conflicts in the early twentieth century, among which the French Revolution.

The third globalization cycle encompasses "huge increases in international trade, capital, and technology flows", from the late nineteenth century until the Great Depression in the 1930s (Coatsworth, 2004, p. 39). Finally, the most recent cycle began with the liberalization of international trade after the Second World War, in a process that did not effectively begin in most of Latin America before the 1980s.

Mignolo (2011, p. 3) summarizes all these globalization movements as "the transformation from a polycentric and noncapitalist world before 1500 to a monocentric and capitalist world order from 1500 to 2000". Aníbal Quijano (2005, p. 107) goes further in investigating the causes of this transformation and states that globalization "began with the constitution of America and of colonial/modern, eurocentered capitalism as a new standard of world power", built through the concept of race and the subsequent racial division of labour.

Hence, Mignolo (2011, p. 5) observes that globalization has two sides: the narrative of modernity and the logic of coloniality. The price to pay for the celebrated modernity remains unseen, covered by all the brilliant innovations it brings: the transformation of human life into one more commodity (Mignolo, 2011, p. 6). Marx and Engels had already noticed this in 1848, when they published the Communist Manifesto, in which it is acknowledged that the bourgeois concept of homeland dissimulates the subservience to capital – and that women, too, are included in the commodities category (MARX & ENGELS, 2010 [1848]).

The hierarchical division of human lives at global level was one more consequence of European domination. According to Mignolo (2011, p. 8), the first criterion to differentiate people came from theology: Christian theology "located the distinction between Christians, Moors, and Jews in the 'blood'". In 1492, "the Christians managed to expel Moors and Jews from the peninsula and enforced conversion on those who wanted to stay" (Mignolo, 2011, p. 8), while racial distinctions gained shape in the New World. From the eighteenth century on, blood gave place to skin colour as a race mark.

Quijano (2005, p. 107) admits that the idea of race might have been brought up as a reference to the phenotypic differences between conquerors and conquered, but what matters is that the narrative was built ever since to support the idea that alleged

biological structures divided those groups. Hence, “such identities were associated to the corresponding hierarchies, places and social roles”, naturalizing relations of domination between Europeans and non-Europeans.

Thus the new racial identities were tied to distinct roles in the work hierarchy, articulating for the first time “all historical forms of controlling work, its resources and its products, around capital and the global market” (Quijano, 2005, p. 107). This articulation validates Marx and Engels’ understanding that the concept of motherland is nothing more than an illusion to proletarians, because they identify themselves first and foremost as subservient to the global market.

To sum up, decolonial thinking is a proposal to “overcome the logic of coloniality underneath the rhetoric of modernity” (Mignolo, 2011, p. 10).

### The contemporary Brazilian precariat

It is redundant to reinforce the similarity between how the yellow fever was dealt with 170 years ago and how Covid-19 has been dealt with since it first came to Brazil. The slowness of any measures taken by the competent authorities’, many of them conflicting with the orders – or disorders? – of the president himself, have had implications that could not be ignored by his most radical supporter.

Nowadays, too, there are more and less valuable lives to the eyes of the government: if black lives did not matter when the tenement Cabeça de Porco was demolished, poor lives remain today at an incomparably higher contamination risk by Covid-19 than middle and upper class lives, as reported by the Epidemiological Bulletin from the city of São Paulo on the 30th of April 2020 (AGÊNCIA ESTADO, 2020). This holds true for the great urban centres, where peripheral regions are crowded with whole families living in a single room, as well as for isolated cities in Brazilian North and Northeast, far away from the great urban centres where the very few adequate hospital beds available are concentrated.

In the current pandemic, too, there is a great deal of reluctance from the authorities about making “a huge unnecessary investment” in mechanical ventilators to save **lives<sup>2</sup>** or adopting social isolation measures, allegedly the real cause of short and medium term economic loss. Therefore, the lives of informal workers are worth less, as they cannot afford to stay home without any income while waiting on the slow progression of the

<sup>2</sup> Quote by the former Health Minister, Nelson Teich, on the 7th of April 2020, in his interview to the YouTube channel *Oncologia Brasil*. Available under <<https://youtu.be/lcWzdGgGLD4>>. Accessed on 20/05/2020.

emergency aid requirement process. Furthermore, the emergency aid corresponds to less than 60% of the already insufficient minimum wage (BRASIL, 2020).

This category of workers is called precariat. According to Braga (2017), the precariat in Brazil began with the development of neoliberal policies that led to an increase of unemployment, underemployment, and informal jobs, mostly since the 1990s. The situation became more serious during the governments of Lula and Dilma, during which the quick (re)absorption of workers into the market ended up positioning them in the lowest levels of the pyramid – especially those working in the service sector. Thus, there has been an increase in outsourcing contracts and the low incomes have led to precarious living conditions. The combination of this labour situation with the explicit financialization of money, through high interest rates and the commodification of urban and rural land, had a great share of influence on the reconfiguration of the working class (BRAGA, 2017).

In the words of Antunes (2018), if the twentieth century was defined by motor cars, the main characteristic of the twenty-first century is digitalization. Nonetheless, digital work has not suppressed the Labour **Theory of Value<sup>3</sup>**, as sociologists like Habermas predicted decades ago: on the contrary, its scope has been expanded, as well as the amount of proletarian workers and the categories they fit into. Nowadays, even graduated professionals from medical or law schools and other traditional areas see themselves bound to several precarious jobs in order to make a living.

In this sense, Byung-Chul Han (2017, p. 23, cited by Rocha, 2019, p. 8) points to the replacement of obedience, a distinctive feature of the Fordist working class, by self-exploration. Hence, the working class has shifted “from a negativity imposed by prohibition to a positivity brought by the promise of an unlimited power, and enabled by ideas of initiative, autonomy e motivation”. This illusion of freedom hides a constant sensation of impotence, which quickly turns into violence in the face of the daily humiliations endured by the explored worker.

Morozov (2018, cited by Rocha, 2019, p. 10) proposes an emancipatory critics of technology, with the purpose of counteracting these consequences of precarious work: understanding the role of digital technologies “in the fluid, constantly evolving architecture of contemporary global capitalism”, is the first step towards understanding how they rule us through the logic of exploration.

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<sup>3</sup> The Labour Theory of Value (LTV), strongly associated to Adam Smith and Karl Marx, argues that the economic value of a good or service is determined by the amount of socially necessary labour required to produce it.

The challenge posed by a such criticism is obviously greater during the pandemic, because social isolation measures impel us to a closer contact with digital medias and to a higher need to make a living through work. In the search for balance, Human Sciences emerge again.

### **Decolonial thinking in the pandemic**

The history of hygienist policies during the yellow fever epidemic in Rio during the nineteenth century ultimately shows that directing investments in research solely to Biological Sciences incurs in disastrous effects to human issues. The whereabouts of the former Cabeça de Porco inhabitants, for instance, never came to be known.

In turn, the procedures adopted to eradicate yellow fever at the end of the nineteenth century, as well as smallpox and the bubonic plague, culminated in the so-called Vaccine Rebellion. These procedures included subpoenas that required renovations to be carried out by landlords and health agents to perform household visits while escorted by policemen, so that residents were not able to resist vaccination. The rebellion sparked after vaccination became mandatory in 1904 and led to tens of deaths and hundreds of arrests (Chalhoub, 2017).

The fact that so many missing, arrested and dead people seem to be nothing more than collateral damage in the face of a greater good, that is, the eradication of health pandemics, demonstrates the very banalization of life pointed out by Mignolo (2011). According to Bauman (2013, p. 115, cited by Rocha, 2019, p. 16), the marching columns of disciplinary society gave way to self-regulatory swarms, in which none of the components holds the slightest idea of common well-being. It is clear that the images of the Fordist working class and the marching columns overlay, as well as the frantic swarm and the endless search for a better performance by precarious workers.

Either way, deep social inequalities are kept. Inequalities that are strictly related to the logic of coloniality in countries that have undergone long colonization processes, such as Brazil.

In this pattern, decolonial thinking represents an awareness level beyond class consciousness. Class consciousness takes place then one realises they are part of the working class, not the elite, and that this fact is not changed by performing intellectual work or having an income above average. In turn, decolonial thinking represents a step further into awareness of the categories determined by modernity.



Decolonial thinking is capable of abolishing the claimed European superiority given as a norm: it is about decoupling from “all power that was not constituted through free decisions by free people”, because the instrumentalization of reason through colonial power has produced distorted paradigms of knowledge (Quijano, 1992, p. 447).

In this regard, Quijano (2005, p. 118) professes:

as we glance at our eurocentered mirror, the image we see is necessarily partial and distorted. The tragedy here is that we have all been conducted, whether aware of it or not, willing or not, to see and accept that image as ours and as belonging only to ourselves. This way, we keep on being what we are not. And as a result, we can never identify our real problems, let alone solve them, unless in a partial and distorted manner.

In conclusion, taking on decolonial thinking means transcending the modern, eurocentered paradigm, that defines how valuable human lives are based on the logic of capital – where Brazilian lives are clearly not among the most “valuable”. Decolonial thinking means the decision to not take the banalisation of life for granted.

### Closing the circle

The hierarchies of the vertical, hegemonic model of knowledge imposed by European colonization have had damaging effects on the colonized societies’ structures. Human development was never a priority in these societies: in many explored countries where the population reached better living standards, it happened at the expense of much suffering by the generation who lived through the globalization cycle (Coatsworth, 2004, p. 39).

Establishing a link between the logic of coloniality and the devastating consequences of Covid-19 in Brazil is an easy task. This relation is based upon two factors.

On one side, the fascination produced by the colonizer’s reality imposed as a role model led us to close our eyes for the reasons behind the differences between that reality and ours, that is, to the very fact of colonization. The individualisation mentality, in which mere members of a self-regulatory swarm do not constitute a proper community, seduced the colonized groups into dissociating the consequences of the colonizer’s classification in terms such as race and their position in the social pyramid. The decoupling is visible when a black person who bolsters racism becomes a president to the Palmares Foundation, to mention an example. The logic is to thoroughly repel the



historical and sociological knowledge accumulated by humankind, as if those areas were less valuable than others.

On the other side, we do not have a solid picture of the real amount of Covid-19 confirmed cases and deaths in Brazil: an insignificant portion of the population has been tested, results might take weeks to be ready, and the average increase of daily burials is alarmingly higher than the deaths officially notified as caused by the disease. Moreover, as mentioned previously, public authorities have made statements about not jeopardising money “unnecessarily” with mechanical ventilators meant to save the lives of those who agonise in hospital beds without being able to breath. There have also been several attempts to impose the prescription of a medicine with serious side effects and no proven effectiveness to treat Covid-19, including an attempt to alter its package leaflet by statute (ISTOÉ, 2020). Even former Health Ministers have left the position in order not to compromise with ideological positions from the government which lack scientific basis.

Thus, the question is clearly not about reallocating resources from education and research in other areas of knowledge, in order to prioritize investments in Biological Sciences. Much on the contrary, the plan is to hinder the scientific development in the country, as proven in successive moves to cut down on graduate research grants since Michel Temer’s government.

In other words, at the same time that we are suffering the consequences of the chronic disregard for Human Sciences, we are not really investing in Biological Sciences. The current government – called misgovernment by many, for not carrying out their role of ensuring basic human rights – sees in the pandemic an opportunity to mislead the population: on one side, they convince the population that it is more important to invest in Biological than in other sciences, and on the other side, they throw cold water on Humanities. Proof lies in the elimination of CNPq research funding grants for Human and Social Sciences undergraduate students between August 2020 and July 2021, as reported by the National Union of Higher Education Institutions’ Professors (ANDES, 2020).

Icing on the cake is the precarious school education during social isolation times. It represents one more step in the process of individuation that makes the student responsible for their own education. Most affected is the low-income student, who has no access to a computer and a good internet connection, but also the one who has these facilities at hand: since the democratic social interaction that allows for a transformative education is no longer present, it leaves room for instrumental teaching disguised as “Education”.

Antunes (2018) observes that the precariat has been expanding into new social strata. If this class was predominantly non-qualified in the past, outsourcing on one side and digital media popularization on the other side included professionals who perform intellectual work in the precariat condition. Thus, this class is currently extending to the digital media sector, which means it encompasses an ever younger population.

Therefore, based on the arguments I present in this article, it is possible to make the following statement: if the category of precariat is determined by being almost exclusively responsible for one's own security, transportation to the workplace, meals during working hours and old-age retirement, the same criteria must apply for those who become responsible for their own education, transportation to school, meals during class time and future perspectives after graduating. This means that school-age children constitute a new form of precariat. They join the swarm in which every single person is responsible for themselves, while the Education Minister says in a nationally broadcast video:

I know the coronavirus disturbs a little, but it disturbs everybody. As a competition, it is fair. Keep studying, keep getting ready and, God willing, we will see each other in a federal university next year.<sup>4</sup>

It was claimed above that a member of an oppressed group can do nothing to change their situation prior to acknowledging they are a member of an oppressed group. It is noticeably interesting for the government that such groups remain ignorant, and the strategies adopted to achieve this are clear as well. That is precisely why the term misgovernment does not apply, as there is a clear project under way. Resuming the proper valuation of the human knowledge accumulated by Human Sciences is the only way to free the colonized precariat in Brazil, which is swarming towards ever more commodified living conditions, that is, increasingly distant from "seeing each other in a federal university" – especially depending on the will of an eurocentered God that denies Science.

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<sup>4</sup> "Minister Abraham Weintraub confirms the test Enem in 2020". Available under <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9711Vur1\\_o0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9711Vur1_o0)>. Accessed on 22/5/2020.

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O objetivo deste trabalho é defender a importância do pensamento decolonial para superar as atuais e futuras consequências da crise causada pela pandemia da doença Covid-19. Procura-se demonstrar a relação entre a ausência de reconhecimento das Ciências Humanas, sobretudo quando orientadas pelo pensamento decolonial, e a catástrofe que tem se abatido sobre o Brasil durante a pandemia atual. O referencial teórico que orienta o trabalho combina o viés histórico e o viés sociológico, complementados por notícias recentes sobre os desdobramentos da pandemia no Brasil. Argumenta-se que deixar de lado as Ciências Humanas para, supostamente, priorizar os investimentos nas Ciências Biológicas não passa de um engodo do Poder Público

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Covid-19; pensamento decolonial; Ciências Humanas; Educação..

El objetivo de este trabajo es defender la importancia del pensamiento decolonial para superar las consecuencias actuales y futuras de la crisis causada por la pandemia de Covid-19. Buscamos demostrar la relación entre la falta de reconocimiento en las Humanidades, especialmente cuando se guía por el pensamiento decolonial, y la catástrofe que se ha producido en Brasil durante la pandemia actual. El marco teórico que guía el trabajo combina la perspectiva histórica y la sociológica, complementado por recientes noticias sobre los desarrollos de la pandemia en Brasil. Se argumenta que dejar de lado a las Humanidades para supuestamente priorizar las inversiones en las ciencias biológicas no es más que una trampa del gobierno.

**PALABRAS-CLAVES:** Covid-19; pensamiento decolonial; Ciencias Humanas; Educación.