

The Political Agenda of The Left In The Face of The Pandemic

SOURCE: [Insurgência](#) | TRANSLATED BY Isabelle Otoni

Brazil's entry into a "second wave" of Covid-19 and the dissemination of the results of the most advanced vaccine trials in its developments raise the question of what is the alternative agenda of the left to face the pandemic, which is escalating to unprecedented levels around the world. While some governments promise the vaccine for January or even December this year, the group of experts from the British government warned of the risk of "having a merry Christmas and then burying your friends and relatives in January and February"; the German Minister of Economy said the country still has at least five months of restrictions.

What the data indicate is that the pandemic is stronger than ever: on November 25th there are almost 60 million official cases around the planet, with 1.4 million deaths – 258,000 in the US, 170,000 in Brazil and 134,000 in India, all governed by extreme right-wing leaders. In the period from November 10 to 16 there were, on a daily average, more than 575 thousand cases and 8,866 deaths. To the deaths are added the sequels in millions of people, sometimes terribly incapacitating. Where the pandemic worsens, governments have to appeal, at some level, to lockdowns, which affect countries, regions and cities, economic branches and sectors of the population differently. But at the same time, vaccines are beginning to be validated by clinical trials and the commercial and geopolitical dispute for what is at stake is intensifying, without considering the problems of what will surely be the largest, most concentrated and most strategic health campaign in history.

Such a central event demands that we put into perspective not its origin – already overly localized in the way capitalist food systems predict other species of living beings, producing viral leaps between species – but its dynamics and the political disputes it generates.

The answers to Covid-19: how to keep business open and not accumulate deaths?

The Covid-19 pandemic, which struck China in January, spread worldwide a month later and arrived in Brazil in March – only eight months ago, therefore – catalyzing a major crisis in modern society.

But Covid-19 seems to have become the object of routine debate on the administration of a gradual “opening” of the economy compatible with maintaining a “plateau” of cases until the arrival of the life-saving vaccine, which would allow a return to “normality”. This trivialization of the way we deal with the pandemic is a political defeat for the left. The discussions that put the issue in a broader perspective are gradually being replaced, in governments and the media, by debates about how much the curve would be flattening or which would be and when the vaccine would arrive. This represented the framing of the problem by the two alternatives in dispute within the business world.

The two policies in dispute are: keeping business untouched, which would generate jobs and need to be saved to get the capitalist economy out of the recession in which it is now played, no matter the cost in human lives; or prioritizing the preservation of lives, ensuring some medical care, to better make business viable in the medium term. In fact, in most cases, the two policies converge into one, seeking to combat the closure of economic activities and stabilize the social crisis by “economic recovery” maintaining a minimum level of social detachment – except in cases where new “peaks” require a lockdown to prevent bodies from piling up.

The number of deaths in Brazil has fallen from more than a thousand a day from June to August to about 400 a day in the past two weeks, but this is still equivalent to a drop of two “boings” every day, particularly affecting the most vulnerable. The 170,000 deaths that we have already registered no longer seem to arouse indignation! And now the number of cases and contagions is growing again and deaths have risen to an average of 500 a day in the last week. There is talk of the arrival of a “second wave” in the country – as if the first had passed.

In the context of this trivialization of the pandemic, even the anti-systemic left seems submissive to the narrowing of the imaginative horizon to the liberal milestones and affected by the “stress” of the period of conviviality with Covid-19. The hegemony of the capitalist class and its dilemmas are accepted, as if they were those of the whole of society, as if isolation or “normalization of business” were possible for the majority of the population of a country like Brazil. Little is debated, even with the opportunities for discussion with the entire society opened by the electoral process, the pandemic that frames, overdetermines and gives meaning to all political action today.

This is not only a pandemic, but a syndemic in a manifestation and a scale unprecedented in modernity – in which health problems and structures of economic, social and psychic inequalities interact and aggravate each other. If the measures to avoid deaths and the speed with which vaccines are developed point to gains and modern solutions to the problem of the pandemic, it also highlights the impasses of this capitalist modernity. And beyond its direct impact, this process has to account for countless victims of other diseases that are being neglected; vaccination campaigns that are not being carried out; mental health problems on a huge scale; the growth of domestic violence against women and children on a large scale; losses in education of hundreds of millions of

children who do not have access to remote education, etc. Syndemia shows a short circuit in social reproduction!

The pandemic has also catalyzed and leveraged a vast recomposition of capitalism, with not only economic but also social, political and environmental dimensions. As Robert Boyer affirms, “one third of production capacity has proved to have no ‘indispensable’ social utility. Some sectors are affected by a structural change in consumption patterns (tourism, transportation, aeronautics, advertising, cultural industry, etc.) and by the collapse of subcontracting networks and the disappearance of several points in the value chain”. Under different forms of neoliberal governance, the transition from Fordist and Toyoist productive structures to a digital platform economy that adds very little value, demands a minimum level of qualification for most of those who work there and generates few productivity gains, but continues to transfer enormous revenues to financial capital.

The pandemic as a portal

Covid-19 has galvanized deep processes underway in society, some with more vigor, others with less. Among them are:

- the weaknesses of neoliberal globalization, its global production chains and its hypermobility with the popularization of commercial aviation, in parallel with humanity’s ecological interdependence and the need for global policies to manage it;
- the geopolitical transformations derived from the displacement of the dynamic center of capitalism from the North Atlantic to East Asia and the rise of China as a power capable of disputing the hegemony of the capitalist world-system with the USA;
- the tendencies toward stagnation of the capitalist economy as a whole, in force since the 2008 crisis, along with the expansion of the great American and Chinese digital

monopolies, which have become the dynamic center of world accumulation;

– the acceleration of the precariousness and uberization of labor and now also the spread of remote labor and digital connectivity on colossal scales;

– the social crisis already latent in galloping inequalities, now escalating with unemployment among the least qualified workers, and the desperate search to maintain the precarious sources of popular income and access to basic services;

– the centrality of social reproduction over an increasingly superfluous production, with the visibility of the oppression and protagonism of women and racialized populations, in a world of both abundance and injustice;

– the centrality of the state and the management of the common, especially the health, social security and income guarantee systems in the face of an increasingly chaotic market society;

– the growing awareness of the environmental crisis, which now refers not only to the use of fossil fuels and the need for energy transition, but also to the industrial food system, source of the pandemic crisis and source of the destruction of strategic biomes of the planet (such as the Amazon...) and consumption linked to hypermobility and disposability;

– the need to guarantee life and fundamental human needs in the face of the superficiality of the consumerist way of life and the inhuman rhythm that the competition associated with it imposes on everyone, a way of life now questioned by the paralysis of many sectors of mercantile activity;

– a discussion of the reordering of territories and, in particular, of urban space and the organization of cities – the object, in central countries, of initiatives aimed at reducing systemic chaos (such as modes of transportation)

– the absence of a multilateral system of international organizations that coordinate global problems more efficiently.

The pandemic can be the trigger for a broad discussion of all these processes, allowing the organization of contemporary capitalist society to be discussed in its scope. The metaphor presented by Arundhati Roy, who places the pandemic as a portal to several other worlds, makes perfect sense.

Even with all the framing and shortening of the discussion to hegemonic ideological frameworks, the pandemic has been impacting the value structure and liberal worldviews. It leads to questioning:

- the exacerbated individualism and the revaluation of various ties, associative, family and community;
- the narrative of the world as a large market self-regulated by human beings reduced to consumers; and
- of a solved history, closed to the new and the unpredictable.

And the pandemic also brought back to another level the perception of the strategic place of intersectionality and its internationalist agency that was already underway in 2019 (ecological, feminist, antiracist, indigenous peoples' struggles), highlighting its role as a guarantor of democratic life (from Chile to Poland, from the U.S. to the Amazon).

What is the political agenda for the pandemic and vaccination?

The response to the pandemic needs, today, to be at the center of all policy that wants structural changes in the world. But this requires breaking with the inertia of common sense – that is, its subordination to the parameters established by the liberal narrative – and making explicit an anti-systemic position.

The debate held by people like Bruno Latour, Naomi Klein, Mike Davis and Rob Wallace, just to mention some of the best-known names, has been emptying out in Brazil. With the exception of Maíra Matias and Raquel Torres, the left here has not been giving the emphasis that the issue demands – as well as the related theme of the climate emergency. This has to be quickly reversed.

1. 1. The starting point is to highlight the reason for the existence of the pandemic: the globalized world of physical hypermobility, the structure of the capitalist food system – especially in animal husbandry – and the destruction at an overwhelming pace of the last biomes still relatively preserved. The viral leap between species and epidemics has been escalating in the last decades, and it seems that this system has been maintained and that new pandemics will continue to occur. This is a political education work that every left must do in its propaganda. In Brazil's case, this means presenting agribusiness and cattle raising, neoextractivism and established globalization as the great enemies of the entire Brazilian population, pillars that sustain the extreme right in these lands.

2. The immediate issue we have to guarantee is the functioning and improvement of the public health system – in Brazil the great achievement that was the SUS, which has been attacked by neoliberal fundamentalism, seeking to privatize it. It also means to defend science, guarantee public funds for health, and defend the workers of the sector against the neoliberal fury of policies to contain spending.

3. 3. But guaranteeing the life of the population also means guaranteeing that it has the material conditions to survive the social crisis that is escalating, materialized in public policies of protection and care for all. This is above all the guarantee of universal citizen's income, an indispensable condition for making the lives of the masses less precarious and the central device of the social security system. But also

the guarantee of remote working conditions and education – including equipment and guaranteed access to broadband throughout the public education system.

4. We need to focus strongly on policies on the development, manufacture and use of vaccines. The central powers sought to privatize and control its development, making it a pawn in the geopolitical game, and Brazil subordinated itself to this. There are new messenger RNA vaccines (Pfizer, Moderna...), which are beginning to show high potential efficacy, but there are also the two vaccines that will be produced in Brazil: Astrageneca-Oxford (in partnership with Fiocruz and the federal government) and Sinovac (in partnership with Butantã and the state government of São Paulo). There is also a fifth vaccine that already emerges as important in the world board, the Sputnik V, developed by the Gamaleya Research Center of Russia.

But between the current stage (phase 3 tests) and a mass vaccination, there is still a very complex path: some vaccines will be expensive, there are huge logistic problems and it will take time to vaccinate the population, particularly in countries lacking public structures – one thing is to vaccinate one billion people in rich countries, another is to vaccinate 7.8 billion. This can be changed by:

- Covax Facility, an international consortium coordinated by the World Health Organization (WHO) in partnership with other entities, which promotes multilateral agreements that accelerate the production and distribution of a vaccine against Covid-19;

- arrival of more alternatives to the vaccine market, as elements not only of Big Pharma, but also of the geopolitical game;

- solidarity and international cooperation agreements to finance what will be by far the largest and most intense

vaccination campaign in history; and, finally, by

– possible patent breaks by countries that may manufacture them (unlikely in the current map of collaboration agreements).

Finally, the vaccine distribution structure establishes a huge logistical challenge, because it requires ultra cooling units. Brazil even has better potential conditions than most countries to respond to this, because of the existence of SUS and institutions like Fiocruz and Butantã, but this will require a lot of public policy. The dispute on the subject has been, until now, between Bolsonaro and Doria!

5. It is necessary to break the dichotomy between normality and social isolation. No society, whatever its social form, can be indefinitely paralyzed for months and years. The pandemic calls into question precisely the established structure of needs and priorities, breaking with the liberal common sense that people must get a way to survive. No, people do not get a way; it is society that must collectively organize itself to meet the fundamental needs of all. A large number of routine but non-essential activities, involving the agglutination of people, must be proscribed indefinitely, but a decent income must be guaranteed for the entire population. Our life is community life, not individual self-organization in the competition of all against all, and the state is the democratic guarantor of this, redistributing income and resources and intervening in the structures of needs created artificially by the market. This is the fundamental ideological combat that every left-wing leadership must do!

6. It is necessary to understand that social distancing is different from social isolation, which must be restricted to extremely vulnerable parts of the population and supported by public policies. When the pandemic began and lockdowns were decreed, the left confused the two things and did not go out to mobilize the population with informal jobs – which could

not stay in lockdown for long without the support of public policies. But the struggle of Black Live Matter in the U.S. showed that this street mobilization is the fundamental element of the change in the correlation of forces. Here it was only the municipal election that forced the left to confront this issue – going out on the streets to vote! The lesson needs to be assimilated: care, in most cases, is social distancing and a change of behavior and practices, possible in the most conscious sectors of the population. But the public authorities must be pressured to leverage awareness and to prioritize, above all, the defense of life.

The pandemic remains, for the left, the great opportunity to break with the inertia of liberal common sense, which naturalizes commercial life. This door is open, but it will not remain so for long!