

EDITORIAL

Biopolitics of COVID-19****Biopolíticas da COVID-19*******Biopolítica del COVID-19***Camilo Darsie¹¹Member of the Graduate Program on Education and Medicine from Universidade de Santa Cruz do Sul (Unisc), Santa Cruz do Sul, RS, Brazil.

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Globalizing processes have intensified human displacement, goods circulation, information sharing and, with that, the spread of the disease. Regarding Covid-19, the first cases occurred in Wuhan, China, and in a few months, from a network established by spatial dynamics, millions of people, in different cities, from different countries, were infected. In other words, a local problem has turned into an unprecedented global crisis.

Based on this, strategies aimed to handle the disease started to be planned and put those plans in action by the national and international health security agencies, by institutions and health professionals, by governments - at different levels - and by the population in general. A set of knowledge and techniques - sometimes contradictory and / or controversial - were established and operated meticulously, forecasts and other quantitative instruments that work together within politics and science. At the same time, such knowledge and techniques engage subjects to follow and strengthen them, taking into consideration their relevance. This set of mechanisms for regulating and enhancing life is called biopolitics.

"Biopolitics deals with the population and the population as a political problem, as a problem that is both, political and scientific, as a biological problem and as a problem of power [...]"¹ (p. 292-293). It is "the way in which, since the XVIII century, has been sought to rationalize the problems posed to government practice by the phenomena proper to a group of living people constituted in population: health, hygiene, birth,

longevity, races..."² (p. 431). Biopolitics gathers complexes forces of institutions that turn to the individual management and collective behaviors, even though understood as non-political.³ Therefore, biopolitics is a set of knowledge, techniques and knowledge-power relationships that seek to improve and control life, at individual and at collective levels. In other words, it operates through populations to regulate the ways of life of each of the subjects in it.

It is relevant to pay attention to the fact that power, in this perspective, is not an element that can be taken, owned, and applied "from the top down". Power needs to be understood as a network that is established by relationships, mechanisms and procedures that aim to maintain the interests of those subjects who are part of the network itself.⁴ Power operates through the culture and customs of multiple individuals and institutions. In that way, "their effects are also multiple, not simply negative, or positive, but ... it just comes with a consequence": they are unstable evaluations, both positive and negative, which can be reversed through history" (p. 77). Power is not good or bad. It is something that produces and is in constant transformation, which should be understood as a set of relationships and not as a bubble of personal or institutional domination. Given this, it is appropriate to think about the mechanisms that involve "power relations" instead of the idea of "power".⁵

In this context, biopolitical strategies are power relations that embrace information and practices on health and

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disease, data and monitoring related to social determinants, global and local economic indexes, as well as other elements that involve populations in different parts of the world. They also become increasingly involved with the biotechnological and neoliberal processes that characterize the scientific advances that have taken place today.⁶ Biopolitical strategies, therefore, hold subjects to lead them towards the “best” ways of thinking and acting. However, it is important to understand that such strategies begin with human dynamics - daily and local dynamics - as they create social standards and norms that guide the decisions of institutions and public managers. Not the other way around.

As a way of exemplifying such issues, scientific denialism in relation to Covid-19, emerges as a good dynamic to be analyzed, as it draws attention to the way it seems to despise lives. This is one of the main contemporary confrontations, mainly in Brazil, given the seriousness of its possible and already existing consequences. In order for many subjects to deny or distrust the pandemic dangers, it was necessary to establish, a long time ago, from power relations, a way of thinking that puts official guidelines under suspicion.

There was no guiding of practices that aimed to destabilize or discredit those people who were responsible for facing the crisis, but a gradual removal of the importance of Science, or of a cut of the knowledge that constitutes it, and several concrete facts that were certain strengthen ideals. This situation also occurred due to the solidification of political polarization in different national contexts and the increase of personal opinions that promise to resolve complex issues based on simple and quick solutions.⁷ It was the significant circulation of information, news - false and true - and ideas of free thinkers related to operation methods, imagined practices and discussions involving the academic and scientific circles that produced the tendency to deny, discredit and even hate these structures. In this context, institutions, governments, and individuals began to be subjects by public and lay opinions, constituted from ideological positions - since there are no ideological-free positions - which put in tension different “truths” associated with the maintenance of the people’s life conditions.

In front of these dynamics, the economic speech, especially the part that refers to entrepreneurship and the possibility of rearranging the national economy, gained momentum, became central topic to several discussions. This situation, therefore, a contradicted way of thinking that long ago put health statements at an advantage when associated with other areas. Thus, vertical norms were not necessary to counter economic demands to health demands through a perspective that prioritizes the previous ones. It was the social dynamics themselves that made the deaths resulting from Covid-19 a consequence of the possible population poverty, also defining statements, regulations, and other official maneuvers about the pandemic.

Biopolitical strategies, hence, were also composed by

indexes that involved difficulties and the numbers comes with economic concerns. Based on this, intense power games, especially on the government side, are carried out weekly to respond population’ demands about data on the disease and economic indicators. As a consequence, there is a gradual resumption of diverse activities and an increase in infections while strengthening the idea of self-management controlling the disease. It came to be understood, through biopolitical strategies, that each citizen is responsible for his illness as well as for his insolvency, according to the choices made about the ways to face the pandemic. In addition to this, economic concerns were placed in front of health, because it became popular, “if the economy sinks, the crisis will be worse than that caused by the disease”, especially in a country marked by major social imbalances.

However, despite the biopolitical strategies associated with Covid-19 regarding the data produced in the Health and Economics fields, they engage populations to decide for life and this is the point that should be noted in this text. It is for the survival - not always of everyone - that the controversies and diverse opinions are strengthened and opposed, causing chaos related to the sanitary, political, economic, and social spheres. Thus, regardless political positions, everyone involved in the process - that is, all subjects and institutions - are regulated and guided through these strategies. Ultimately, Covid-19’s biopolitics call on subjects to be their co-authors when they support them and, also, when they think they avoid them, both in terms of health and in terms of the economy.

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