

From the “Evil Genius” to the fetish of the academic fast food



Review of the Book *Das loucuras da razão ao sexo dos anjos: biopolítica, hiperprevenção e produtividade científica*. [From the madness of reason to the sex of angels: biopolitics, hyperprevention and scientific productivity.] Authors: Luis David Castiel; Javier Sanz-Valero and Paulo Roberto Vasconcellos-Silva. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Fiocruz, 2011.

Verusca Moss Simões dos Reis¹

¹ Doctor of Philosophy from the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ). Junior Postdoctoral Researcher for Brazil's National Council for Scientific and Technological Development in the Program PPGFi/UERJ.

Corresponding author:

Verusca Moss Simões dos Reis
E-mail: verusca.reis@gmail.com

Das loucuras da razão ao sexo dos anjos [From the madness of reason to the sex of angels] is a provocative book right from its title and cover. From the very beginning, it invites readers to reflect – and I would say that this is its main purpose: to make us wonder what the contents of the book will be. Does it mean to say that we have lost reason and, thus, we ponder over meaningless things, for example, the sex of angels? Is Descartes’ evil genius - which prompts us to doubt our senses – back to afflict us? Well, perhaps it has never actually left. After all, the dream that only reason (or its prodigal children: science and technology) can bring salvation has long been questioned, to name but a few, by Friedrich Nietzsche, Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, the Romantics in Germany, the Frankfurt School, among others.

In general, the book argues that the modern view of reason as a bulwark for human freedom, if taken to its logical conclusion, can really “drive us mad”. The very purpose of the book is that of showing, from the realm of public health, but not limited to it, how the logics of hyperprevention (from the mitigation of disease-related risks through immunization, and diets that can reduce risk factors, to computer programs that monitor asteroids that could possibly destroy Earth) is set in the context of biopolitics.

In other words, the authors argue that the relentless quest for the mitigation of “risks” imprisons our “reason” and restricts our ability to provide creative solutions which lie outside these models. The allusion to the *madness* of reason appears in the book in a number of ways and promptly on its cover, where the top hat alludes to “madness” in the book *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

The book has six chapters which are preceded by a preface, an introduction and a prologue, written out of a need to contextualize the book and slowly introduce readers to the text because of its controversial nature. An epilogue is included at the end. The preface, written by Dr. Sandra Caponi, from the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), makes an excellent presentation of the book and vigorously summarizes its main objective:

It is an invitation to start an urgently needed theoretical reflection on how knowledge is being produced in the area of health. The book aims to assist in dismantling the traps installed by the proliferation of techno-scientific discourses which, by the mediation of correlations, probabilities and statistics, construct and legitimize the risk society (CAPONI, 2001, p. 17).

In the prologue, “Loucuras da razão” [*Madness of reason*], the authors not only introduce the works by Lewis Carroll but also use his biography, divided between the mathematician and the writer, to denominate him “mad protocologist”, that is, one that does not follow rules or protocols. The neologism “protocologist” is used a few times throughout

the book to denominate “an imaginary unconditional supporter of protocols that is somehow devoted to producing, dealing with or following protocols within their research, planning, management or intervention practices in the area of health, whether in the collective or the individual sphere” (CASTIEL *et. al.*, 2011, p. 29). Carroll could be considered “insane” if a more comprehensive definition of insanity is used (FERREIRA, 1999), one which goes beyond the border of mental insanity, but also encompasses “irreflection, lack of discernment, imprudence, temerity, but, especially, whatever evades the rules; what is out of the ordinary; and also the person, animal or thing to which great love or enthusiasm is devoted” (CASTIEL *et. al.*, 2011, p. 28). For the authors, the quest for technological improvements that are solely productivity-focused, within instrumental reason, would be driving our reason into madness. One example of that is the attempt to mitigate risks and the increased prevention in society at large.

The authors go beyond the area of health and also address the phenomenon of mass production in academic life, responsible for leading research practice to be driven by external demands, ultimately changing the very conception of knowledge which is then guided by instrumental values. In this productivity logics within a corporate and market-oriented culture, the production of researchers is, most of the times, assessed by quantity rather than quality, causing them to *almost* lose the true meaning of their activity

and behave, according to the authors, like “Alice’s rabbits” (p. 29). The use of irony, as illustrated here, is prevalent throughout the whole book and is considered as a possible solution to this whole insanity, according to the authors.

In the first chapter, with the curious title “Utopia/atopia: Alma-Ata, saúde pública e o ‘Cazaquistão’” [*Utopia/atopy: Alma-Ata, public health and ‘Kazakhstan’*], the authors take stock of the last three decades, taking the conference held in Alma-Ata in 1978, in Kazakhstan, as a landmark. The legacy of the conference was the (utopian?) ideal of health for all, which was later incorporated into the legislation of several countries, including Brazil. According to the authors, the utopian character of the principles discussed at the conference has been used with double meanings (flattering or derogative), according to interests. They also point out that the meaning of utopia as sharing goods and collective well-being, present in the work of Thomas More, has changed. The authors use the interpretation of Bauman’s idea of “utopia” to show that, in our time, it assumes “a focal, active, practical and individual character” (Castiel et. Al., 2011, p. 65), which encourages individual rather than collective problem-solving. The quest for “perfect health” by minimizing the risks could also be a new “utopia,” which also “drives our reason mad”.

In this context, is it still appropriate to inquire about the human quality of humanity? Will there still be any sense in discussing human subjectivity ontologically as instituting its condition? Will this matter become anachronistic because subjectivity

can cease to exist, since no devices will be identified by the empiricists of views, meanings and values that will be promoted to final judges defining the existence of things? (CASTIEL et. al., 2011, p. 72)

Chapter 2, “A biopolítica e os enredos imunitários” [*Biopolitics and the immune plots*], is exactly about the relationship between the emerged notion of risk within an ideology of biopolitics, and the contemporary attempt to constantly mitigate risks. With this objective in mind, the authors base their discussion on the work of Foucault, especially, but they also quote Agamben, Esposito, Negri and Heller. Although there is no consensus on the definition of risk, such concept sheds light on how power structures are linked to social structures and historical contexts. The crux of the matter is in a situation where experts are given more and more power to tell us how to become epidemiologically active citizens, on one hand, and the quest for “perfect health” will be pursued by politically anomic individuals, on the other hand. In other words, individuals do not go to the agora to discuss how we live, but rather follow the rules decided by experts.

The third and fourth chapters have the same theme, as they both evaluate the concepts of risk (Bauman, Beck, Robert Castel and Lupton) and hyperprevention. Chapter 3 (“Epidemiologia, desastres, hiperprevenção e corpo-risco”) [*Epidemiology, disasters, hyperprevention and body-risk*] shows how the notion of hyperprevention applies to the context of disasters and catastrophes, generating a kind of epidemiology of disasters

which seeks to mitigate risks as much as possible. Chapter 4 (“Risco catastrófico em termos pessoais: saúde, genética e promoção da longevidade”) [*Catastrophic Risk in personal terms: health, genetics, and promotion of longevity*] discusses how the notion of risk operates at the individual level, causing great distress, as people try very hard to increase longevity and avert the catastrophic fear of death through food, cosmetic and medical procedures.

The last two chapters serve as a curtain that closes the last acts, pointing to the two facets of the same coin. While Chapter 5 (“A promoção da saúde como prática religiosa”) [*The promotion of health as a religious practice*], on the one hand, shows the veneration of health as a religious epiphany, Chapter 6 (“O artigo científico como mercadoria acadêmica”) [*The research paper as an academic commodity*], on the other hand, criticizes one of the social mechanisms that lends credence to the figure of the specialist: scientific productivity. These two chapters are followed by the epilogue “Sexo dos anjos (na torre de marfim)” [*Sex of angels (in the ivory tower)*], where the authors criticize the overestimation of instrumentation in health.

We can briefly say that the background of the authors’ analyses is the modern idea that scientific and technological advancement, when serving to reason, would favor the construction of a “paradise” on earth. This criticism makes room for the following question: what really makes us happy *collectively*? The response of late modernity was to invest in the alleged

“individual” happiness based on the view of the individual as one who seeks his own happiness, which, in most cases, implies the role of consumer rather than the role of citizen.

Another underlying issue is to assess the extent to which life is worth living in a society where the quest to mitigate “the risk” generates a high degree of anxiety in individuals, while the concomitant introduction of biopolitics prevents them from thinking about the kind of society they want to live in. Although the authors have not put the idea forward in those terms, it can be said that the authors make readers wonder: aren’t we paying too high a price to live in a society that seeks to mitigate risks in all sectors? And finally, another issue that can be inferred from the themes brought up by the authors is that we need, both collectively and individually, face the fear of death. Every endeavor made to minimize such risk is actually an attempt to postpone something that is inevitable for everyone.

We must reflect on what meaning we want to give to many scientific and technological advances, without losing sight that this discussion involves an ethical and political debate and the confrontation of what is behind the attempt to mitigate risks. Perhaps it is time to reflect on the meaning of our human existence and the price we are willing to pay for the scientific and technological advances while not allowing such quest to cause our “insanity.” In a way, the same kind of inquiry made by Alice is the one proposed by the book: a reflection on the

search for identity (in the book, it was aimed at the collective level) and also on the lifestyle we want to have or that we *can have*.

I believe that what the book could have done was to propose solutions to the problems addressed, that is, alternative routes, although this was not its original intention. Having

said that, in a time of crisis of ideologies, in which there should be more tangible collective outputs than individual paths, we must seek new political and educational models that can bring society to the center of debate. However, the book has achieved its goal by opening a crack in the brief “window” of our reason, avoiding its complete insanity.

