

PANDEMIC AND BIOPOLITICS**PANDÊMICA E BIOPOLÍTICA**

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Our city dies —we've lost count of all the dead. Her sons lie in the dirt unpitied, unlamented. Corpses spread the pestilence, while youthful wives and grey-haired mothers on the altar steps wail everywhere and cry in supplication, seeking to relieve their agonizing pain. Their solemn chants ring out —they mingle with the voices of lament. O Zeus' golden daughter, send your support and strength, your lovely countenance!²

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*

ABSTRACT

The circulation of the SARS-COV-2 virus has generated a whole range of economic, social, health and securitarian effects on the planetary population, the consequences of which are not only reduced to the containment of mass contagion, but have had an impact on the daily lives of humans. As a result of the biopolitical strategies implemented by different States, the biological life of human beings is currently governed by other means justified in order to maintain health or prevent death from COVID-19 disease. The essay main goal is to analyze this event through concepts proposed and developed by Michel Foucault concerning biopower and biopolitics. These concepts can criticize the power over life exercised by both States and international organizations seeking to regulate the effects of the virus and disease. Also, through the framework of biopolitics, we can show the characteristic event of the 21st century: the transition from epidemics and endemics to pandemics. What this essay is trying to show is the extreme biologization of the lives of humans who cannot delinquete from that identity, on which it operates a whole series of biopolitical strategies to control it.

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² From the translation by Ian Johnston, Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC, BY-NC-SA, (August 2004).

Key words: SARS-COV-2, biopolitics, Pandemic, security, circulation.

RESUMO

A circulação do vírus SARS-COV-2 gerou toda uma gama de efeitos econômicos, sociais, de saúde e securitários na população planetária, cujas consequências não se reduzem apenas à contenção do contágio em massa, mas impactam a vida diária dos humanos. Como resultado das estratégias biopolíticas implementadas por diferentes Estados, a vida biológica do ser humano é atualmente regida por outros meios justificados para manter a saúde ou prevenir a morte por doença COVID-19. O objetivo do ensaio é analisar esse evento por meio de conceitos propostos e desenvolvidos por Michel Foucault sobre biopoder e biopolítica. Esses conceitos podem criticar o poder sobre a vida exercido tanto por Estados quanto por organizações internacionais que buscam regular os efeitos do vírus e da doença. Além disso, através do quadro da biopolítica, podemos mostrar o acontecimento característico do século 21: a transição das epidemias e endemias para as pandemias. O que este ensaio tenta mostrar é a extrema biologização da vida de humanos que não podem se delinear daquela identidade, na qual opera toda uma série de estratégias biopolíticas para controlá-la.

Palavras-chave: SARS-COV-2, biopolítica, pandemia, segurança, circulação.

INTRODUCTION

By September 18th, 2020, The SARS-CoV-2 virus had infected 30,660,492 people, and caused 956,969 deaths worldwide. The numbers for Mexico were 688,954 cases and 72,803³ deaths. In light of this tragic situation, the objective of our study is to analyze this scourge using concepts developed by Michel Foucault in relation to biopower and biopolitics. Our approach thus sets out from the final chapter of his book *The History of Sexuality. The Will to Knowledge*, entitled “Right of death and power over life”. In addition, it considers two classes that he gave on March 17th, 1976, in the course *Defending society*, and January 11th, 1978, in a course called *Security, territory, population*. The relevance of Foucauldian concepts emerges, above all, from the fundamental fact of biopower, which invades the totality of life to administrate by controlling bodies at both the individual and population

³ For more information, go to the official website of the government of Mexico: <https://www.gob.mx/salud/documentos/coronavirus-covid-19-comunicado-tecnico-diario-238449>

levels. In the latter case –Foucault’s body species– power operates on the area of life that corresponds to biopolitics, whose objects of intervention are biological processes: birth, death, health, disease, reproduction, longevity, and the hope of life, among others. The goal of regulating these phenomena is to optimize the life of the population and increase, then extract, its strength. One of the phenomena that Foucault stresses is the change in the classification of diseases from epidemic to endemic, the latter understood as permanent or cyclical diseases that sap the strength of populations and force States to make costly expenditures.

The presence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and COVID-19 begs several questions: What does the historical change in diseases now considered pandemic really mean? What type of biopolitics is operating in the presence of this virus? What regulating mechanisms are being imposed on populations? What are the consequences of the presence of the virus and, especially, of the biopolitical strategies applied? To respond to these issues, we address the following themes: *a)* biopower and biopolitics; *b)* two hypotheses on the emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, from laboratory-to-kitchen; *c)* epidemic, endemic, and pandemic; *d)* security and pandemic; and *e)* the daily life of biopolitics.

a) Biopower and biopolitics

In the almost eight months that the SARS-CoV-2 virus has been spreading across the planet authorities both political (Heads of State) and medical (from secretaries of health to expert epidemiologists) have shouldered the task of controlling its propagation to prevent increases in the number of people infected and of deaths caused by the COVID-19 respiratory disease. Through the strategies implemented, these authorities demonstrate that controlling the virus entails, above all, controlling the population. While the virus as a foreign invasive agent constitutes a threat that crosses all types of borders (political to epidermal), the population is the object that has really been controlled and contained by narrowing or limiting its spatiality to the sphere of the home. In fact, the virus’ emergence has allowed authorities to impose other forms of control on people. Confronting the virus requires not only limiting its spread and reducing death tolls, but also maintaining and preserving life. By taking control of the pandemic, political and health sector authorities admit,

unsurprisingly but firmly, that they are in charge of governing the life of the population. This, clearly exceptional, pandemic has revealed in stark reality the close, even intimate, relation between political power and medical power and, moreover, confirmed a rule: populations can be governed by any and all means related to preserving life.

While the pandemic and virus have put the life of populations in peril, the aforementioned authorities have seized responsibility for regulating this phenomenon by implementing a strategy that foments immobilizing, isolating, and confining people in their homes. Fear of contagion means that workplaces like stores, factories, restaurants, maquiladoras, assembly plants, universities, and all types of non-essential businesses stand empty, while roads, avenues, highways, and even maritime and aerospace routes reduce circulation and traffic to a minimum, as consequences of closures and confinement. Do those transgressive forms of order that privilege freedom, agglomeration, and circulation now stand beyond order itself? In reality, they are visible effects of a type of power that Foucault identified, one with mechanisms designed to “incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them” (Foucault, 1978, p. 136). This type of power –Foucault’s biopower– takes as its object the social body to “ensure its life, and maintain and develop it” (Foucault, 1978, p. 136). In the exceptional case of this pandemic, closure, confinement, and reduced circulation facilitate ensuring, maintaining, and developing life, but at the same time contribute to intensifying and ordering forces through control and surveillance.

The practices of social distancing and confinement implemented by authorities reveal the two poles that make up biopower. The object of the anatomo-politics of the human body is the body machine, for it focuses on “disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness, and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic control” (Foucault, 1978, p. 139). The biopolitics of population, in contrast, center on the body species that is “imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary” (Foucault, 1978, p. 139). The characteristic procedures of this pole are regulatory controls. It is from these two poles that biopower completely invades life, which it controls by administering bodies. In the current pandemic, the mechanisms of

power urge people to reduce circulation and adopt distancing and immobilization with the goal – within biopolitics’ framework of action– of protecting the body species from infection and becoming a vehicle of transmission of the virus. Here, the very biological composition of the body becomes an accomplice of the enemy. Like a Trojan horse, the virus hides in the body, is transported there, and from it can penetrate any border. As the data on proliferation show, this coronavirus was detected too late, not until it had begun to ravage people’s health. A second aspect, closure and confinement in the home, responds to procedures of power characteristic of the disciplines that, like the coupling of the technological world of devices interconnected by the Internet, are now implemented through work and remote education using virtual media and platforms that transmit in real time, moving the office or classroom into the dining room, living room, bedroom, or study at home. These forms ensure training and increase aptitudes, but also extort strength from, and increase the utility of, the individual, or the body machine, while maintaining it through other means within the systems of economic control that can function with those means; including education at practically all levels and the world of work, now considered from the viewpoint of immaterial work that operates through algorithms, databases, or programming systems. Despite the exceptional nature of the pandemic, authorities have not established –though it may appear they have– exceptional norms for populations or individuals; rather, they have simply intensified and diversified existing ones in the concrete space of the home, which now functions as abode, hospital, office, classroom and, in some cases, prison (since ambulatory COVID-19 patients with mild symptoms are treated at home, but cannot leave or have contact with others, as if under house arrest. By analogy, patient and delinquent can be *freed* from confinement by an authority, medical or judicial, respectively). This demonstrates that the practices imposed to combat the pandemic are inscribed within the procedures of biopower. In the face of virus, disease, and death, administrating bodies has the goal of ensuring, maintaining, and developing life.

b) Two hypotheses on the emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus: laboratory vs. kitchen

Foucault holds that with the birth of biopower in the 18th century “Western man was gradually learning what it meant to be a living species in a living world, to have a body, conditions of existence, probabilities of life, an individual and collective welfare, forces that could be modified, and a space in which they could be distributed in an optimal manner. For the first time in history, no

doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence” (Foucault, 1978, pp. 138). This idea has been radicalized since the mid-20th century, and even more in the 21st, since the learning that humans as a living species have achieved during this time has led to the discovery that the living world they inhabit is populated, as well, by beings that are not, properly-speaking, alive, at least not alive like cellular organisms, but that have the capacity to invade and alter bodies, perturb their conditions of existence, alter their probabilities of survival, and affect health, both individual and collective. Humans have discovered that they and the living world around them, populated by pets, farm animals, and plants, can be threatened by agents that can lead them to the verge of death. Today, this threat comes in the form of viruses that, though identified in the second half of the 19th century, did not become visible until the advent of the electron microscope in the 1930s. By the end of the 20th century, over 2,000 different types of virus had been identified and classified as threats that attack the integrity of the biological body. If analyses follow the evidence, then the relation of humans and viruses has, in reality, only a short history or, as Foucault would say, biohistory.

Today, facing the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in the 21st century, Foucault’s ideas take on new relevance, for they evidence the fact that humans are still immersed in the *threshold of biological modernity* such that “the species is wagered on its own political strategies” (Foucault, 1978, p. 143). Today more than ever, due to both the negative effects of the virus on human health and the disciplinary processes and regulatory controls imposed worldwide, the species is playing an important role not only at the level of states, but planetwide. Because of the pandemic, virtually all nation-states have adopted the same political strategies to contain the contagion for they recognize that the biological body representative of a species resides in their citizens, beneath their status as subjects of rights. The virus, which requires live cells to replicate, encountered in the human species a convenient receptacle for achieving reproduction. In doing so, it confirms the biological fact of species. This explains why the –now virtually– universal administration of bodies insists upon implementing basic measures: no hugging or kissing, obligatory use of masks to prevent spitting while talking, frequent handwashing, etc. People’s compliance with these measures displays not only their docility and obedience of sanitary norms, but also their awareness of belonging to the human species. As the news reports and real-time ‘apps’ that register the spread of the contagion reveal, this virus manifests the planetary presence of the human species, beyond membership in a certain nation-state. Indeed, for some western religions like Catholicism, the virus, aside from being a sign of

the apocalypse, could offer confirmation of the historical proliferation of one sole line of descent with origins that trace back to Adam and Eve, though this would entail recognizing that a god created a lifeform that possesses the capacity to evolve and the ability to mutate. Since viruses are made up of proteins and genetic material (DNA or RNA), and clearly related to other cellular organisms, they do in fact mutate.

What does the emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in Wuhan, China, in 2019 imply? What does this unprecedented viral contamination mean? Moreover, how is the emergence of the virus to be explained? Authorities in the political and health sectors offer two theories. One has been voiced by U.S. President Donald Trump and his Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, who declared that the coronavirus pandemic originated in a laboratory in Wuhan. They allege that Chinese scientists created a virus that was later released. The second, developed and defended by health sector authorities at the World Health Organization (WHO) –and yet to be proven⁴– holds that the virus was transmitted from an animal –perhaps a bat or pangolin– to humans since those creatures are trafficked, marketed, and cooked in Wuhan’s exotic markets. What are the implications and consequences of these explanations in the reflexive framework of biopower? First, we must emphasize that although these two groups of authorities concur on the importance of implementing sanitary strategies, they disagree on the explanation of the virus’ origin. The question is why political authority insists on creation in a lab in China, while the health sector sustains contagion between animals? The former could trigger a belligerent conflict launched in the name of biological life and the health of the human species (invested by the concept of *humanity*), while the latter would reaffirm the consequences of the increasingly complex interaction within the living world that humans inhabit. In reality, these possible explanations reveal, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, the demiurgic capacity of humans. A virus created in a lab or a virus *created* in a kitchen. It is hardly surprising that these two spaces bring into play the Promethean heritage that established the alliance between fire and technique. Despite their evident differences, the laboratory, constructed with modern instruments and techniques, *versus* the kitchen with its millenarian utensils and techniques, coincide, in a sense, in that their manipulative, transformative procedures and practices with live organisms produce, after a series of probings, test subjects: in the

⁴ See Andersen, K.G., Rambaut, A., Lipkin, W.I. *et al.* (2020) “The Proximal Origin of SARS-CoV-2” in *Nature Medicine* 26, pp. 450-452, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-0820-9>

case of the lab, animals for study; in that of the kitchen, dishes to be tasted (tested) by diners, another type of test subject. Their distinct offerings (a product tested in or on the body vs. one tasted in the mouth) does not alter this coincidence since, as authorities and current events warn, both have had negative effects on humans through viral contagion. The distinct explanations of these two authorities can be subjected to an analysis from the reflexive framework of biopower, perhaps not to obtain evidence of the fact, but only of its feasibility. These explanations will be discussed as two hypotheses: 1) conscious creation; and 2) unconscious creation.

1) *Hypothesis of conscious creation.* The SARS-CoV-2 virus was created in a lab. This phrase reveals not only a fantastic event for the advancement of science but, above all, the historical development of biopower. Foucault holds that we must keep in mind that biopolitics “brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life” (Foucault, 1978, p. 143). But the second half of the 20th century has shown that knowledge-power transforms both human and non-human life, including that of animals and plants. The genetically-modified organisms used on industrial farms that raise livestock and crops are proof of this. Moreover, labs have successfully transformed the life of a mouse now known as *oncomouse*[®] because a genetic modification makes it carry a specific gene of susceptibility to developing cancer. If this has occurred with mice, how are we to ponder human life from this perspective? In *The Crisis of Medicine or the Crisis of Antimedicine*, Foucault explains this as follows:

Nowadays, with the techniques at the disposal of medicine, the possibility for modifying the genetic cell structure not only affects the individual or his descendants but the entire human race. Every aspect of life now becomes the subject of medical intervention. We do not know yet whether man is capable of fabricating a living being which will make it possible to modify the entire history of life and the future of life.

[...] The doctor and the biologist are no longer working at the level of the individual and his descendants, but are beginning to work at the level of life itself and its fundamental events (Foucault, 2004, p. 7).

The “nowadays” to which Foucault refers was the year 1974, the year of his lecture. Just 46 years later, U.S. authorities announced that a virus whose existence threatens the human species was created in a laboratory. If true, then scientists, physicians, and biologists have found in viruses the means to modify the genetic weaponry of cells; indeed, they have discovered a way to work at

the level of life itself (biological processes) and its fundamental events (life, death, health, and disease).

Foucault's reflection can be complemented by the analysis of biopower he gave in a lecture on 17 March, 1976, during the course *Society Must Be Defended* where, after warning of the existence of a power that has taken charge of the body and of life or, worse yet, "of life in general, with the body at one pole and the population at the other" (Foucault, 2003, p. 253), he identified a paradox of biopower related to the capacity to create and utilize atomic power, "which is not simply the power to kill, in accordance with the rights that are granted to any sovereign, millions and hundreds of millions of people (after all, that is traditional)" (Foucault, 2003, p. 229 253). In the case of atomic power, the paradox lies in that not only does this have the capacity to kill, which could be understood within the framework of the exercise of sovereign power, but that it is a type of power that has the capacity "to kill life itself", one "capable of suppressing life itself" (Foucault, 2003, p. 253). This is the excess that biopower places above sovereign rights:

This excess of biopower appears when it becomes technologically and politically possible for man not only to manage the life but to make it proliferate, to create living matter, to build the monster and, ultimately, to build viruses that cannot be controlled and that are universally destructive. This formidable extension of biopower, unlike what I was just saying about atomic power, will put it beyond all human sovereignty (Foucault, 2003, p. 254).

What the affirmation of political authorities in the U.S. really conceals is the struggle by a sovereign power to impose itself upon biopower, whose creative action –in Foucault's words, action capable of creating life and the monster– has unleashed a virus that today is uncontrollable and universally destructive. The fact that U.S. authorities accuse the Chinese of creating and disseminating the virus could be understood as a conflict between nations, but if we look more carefully, we may discover that what lies at the core of the discussion is a conflict between sovereign power and biopower. If a war were to break out between nations because of the virus, it could only be resolved in the interstice between these two forms of power: either millions of people will die, or life itself will be suppressed.

2) *Hypothesis of unconscious creation.* Why the discrepancy in the explanations of animal origin? Why does political authority, in this case in the U.S., not coincide with health sector authorities? Why do the latter insist on explaining the virus' origin by contagion between different species of animals? To respond, we must begin by recalling the historical transformation of power analyzed by Foucault:

And I think that one of the greatest transformations that political right underwent in the nineteenth century was precisely that, I wouldn't say exactly that sovereignty's old right –to take life or let live– was replaced, but it came to be complemented by a new right which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it. This is the right, or rather precisely, the opposite right. It is the power to “make” live and “let” die. The right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live. And then this new right is established: the right to make live and to let die (Foucault, 2003, p. 218 241).

The complement to sovereign right, in this case, is biopower; understood as the right to allow people to live or to let them die. Understanding this historical transformation of power, especially its technologies and mechanisms, allows for the introduction of a whole series of milieus that problematize and, in turn, seek to regulate the existence of the human species; that is, human lives. Concepts that stand out in this series of milieus include those of habitat or environment. One western man learned, little-by-little, what is involved in being a living species in a living world, he could not set aside the analysis of this topic but must consider the effects –positive and negative– produced upon the existence, or conditions of existence, of human beings understood from a biological perspective. For Foucault, this “control over relations between the human race, or human beings insofar as they are a species, as living beings, insofar as they are living beings, and their environment, the milieu in which they live” (Foucault, 2003. p. 245) reveals a dimension that is natural and another not so natural where we can decipher the causes of health or disease and the stability of both the conditions of life and those that provoke the death of human beings. The natural dimension of the milieu includes the “geographic, climatic, or hydrographic environment” (Foucault, 2003, p. 245). The non-natural dimension emerges with the city. As Foucault observes, the natural and non-natural environments produce kickback effects, though the city was created by humans, while the environment is simply present. With respect to the latter, Foucault offers the example of

“epidemics linked to the existence of swamps throughout the first half of the nineteenth century” (Foucault, 2003, p. 245).

The fact that health authorities warn that the virus emerged in humans via contagion from other animals means that their affirmations are inscribed in a logic of biopower, not sovereign power. By stating that the virus came from an animal that was trafficked, marketed, and cooked in a market in Wuhan, they do naught but confirm the kickback effects of the environment on humans. Just as swamps caused the epidemics of the 19th century, a bat that may have migrated due to global warming, urban sprawl, or population growth, is the cause of the current 21st-century pandemic. The declarations of health authorities bring the natural and non-natural dimensions of the environment into contact because they identify an animal as the carrier of the virus, but the bridge of contagion with humans was the market. In this sense, we must add to Foucault’s analysis of the relation between biopower and environment another variable to the causes that affect the existence of humans understood as a species; namely, zoonotic diseases, those that humans acquire through interaction with other species of animals. The living world of which humans form part presents a broad range of risks with which we must learn to cope. Coexistence with other animals is no exception. Moreover, if the virus comes from another animal it proves that humans are just another animal species in the living world among countless others that exist in the natural and non-natural environments. Confirming this would not only provide a feasible explanation for the emergence of the virus but, by being immersed in the reflexive framework of biopower, would regulate the sovereign power of the U.S. authorities that lets people die and allows them to live.

c) Epidemic, endemic, and pandemic

And deadly pestilence, that fiery god, swoops down
to blast the city, emptying the House of Cadmus, and
fills black Hades with groans and howls.

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*⁵

⁵ From the translation by Ian Johnston, Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC, BY-NC-SA (August 2004).

In times of SARS-CoV-2, there is no divinity to blame for the ravages of the city, no Apollonian oracle to offer a clue as to the origin of the epidemic, much less a sacred seer “in whom the truth resides” (see note 3). What we have are viruses that place life itself in peril, including that of researchers in their scientific laboratories who study the causes of the epidemic in search of a cure or vaccine, as well as spokespersons of international organizations whose discourses pretend to tell the truth. In contrast to Sophocles’ tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*, finding the cause of the current pandemic will not free (save?) the human species from the virus. One of the greatest fears is that while the virus refuses to disappear, the disease it produces will become endemic. Health authorities, specifically at the WHO, warned of this reality and determined that the COVID-19 epidemic would come to be recognized as a pandemic. What does this change mean? Is it just a question of quantities and proportions? To address these issues, given the lack of sufficient evidence to demonstrate the hypothesis of conscious creation, the following analysis sets out from the hypothesis of unconscious creation, especially through analogy to other epidemics that have been caused by contact with animal species; for example, bird flu (from poultry), swine flu (from hogs), ebola (from bats), zika fever and dengue (from mosquitoes), or HIV/AIDS (from monkeys).

With regards to their power over life, epidemic, endemic, and pandemic phenomena cannot escape from its rationality; to the contrary, it introduces them into its calculations, because administrating life based on controlling bodies depends on it. If biopower and biopolitics have as their object the fundamental events of life –natality, mortality, longevity– then they cannot omit diseases that threaten the life of populations from their calculations, for they impact the conditions of existence and generate political and economic problems that are difficult to address and resolve. Foucault’s analysis of the 18th century showed that biopower and biopolitics focused less on epidemics –though these were by no means omitted or forgotten– than on endemics, because the latter affect both the mortality (global number of deaths) and morbidity (proportion of disease) rates of a population. Calculating these phenomena can only be done by statistics. As Foucault observed: “it was at this

moment that the first demographers begin to measure these phenomena in statistical terms” (Foucault, 2003, p. 243). He further indicates that in terms of biopolitics morbidity is concerned not only with the problem of epidemics “the threat of which had haunted political powers ever since the early Middle Ages (these famous epidemics were temporary disasters that caused multiple deaths, times when everyone seemed to be in danger of imminent death)” (Foucault, 2003, pp. 243), but also endemics:

[...] in other words, the form, nature, extension, duration, and intensity of the illnesses prevalent in a population. These were illnesses that were difficult to eradicate and that were not regarded as epidemics that caused more frequent deaths, but as permanent factors which –and that is how they were dealt with– sapped the population’s strength, shortened the working week, wasted energy, and cost money, both because they led to a fall in production and because treating them was expensive (Foucault, 2003, pp. 243-244).

In general, Foucault stresses that epidemics bring death “that suddenly swooped down on life... now something permanent, something that slips into life, perpetually gnaws at it, diminishes it and weakens it” (Foucault, 2003, p. 244). While this conceptualization corresponds to the 18th century, in the late the 20th century we found ourselves dealing with pandemic diseases. Epidemic or endemic diseases may affect a single country, even a region, but pandemics are worldwide, planetary, in nature. Global diseases it seems, pertain to a totally globalized world. In the case of COVID-19, the circuits of globalization –air traffic, trade routes, tourism– are the media that have transported the virus from China to virtually every corner of the planet. Biopower and biopolitics, therefore, must now include in their calculations pandemics that gallop somewhere between epidemic and endemic diseases.

The WHO is responsible for identifying, clarifying, and classifying the phenomenon of pandemics, and for defining their phases of development. In 1999, it published an early guide to preparing for pandemics. That text was revised in 2005 and actualized in 2009 with the goal of enabling “countries to be better prepared for the next pandemic” (WHO, 2009, p. 14). Its starting point is the influenza A pandemic (H5N1) that infected both farm animals and humans. Though it deals with other viruses and diseases, this guide serves as a paradigmatic document for confronting pandemics. A second text, published some 10 years ago, prefigured what was to come with the COVID-19 epidemic in

Wuhan, China. It warns that, no matter what actually transpires, the efforts of most countries to anticipate and prepare for epidemics will be incomplete and can cause:

- a rapid spread of the pandemic disease that allows little time to implement ad hoc mitigation measures;
- medical facilities struggling to cope with a possible large surge in demand;
- potentially serious shortages of personnel and products resulting in disruption of key infrastructure and services, and continuity of all sectors of business and government;
- delayed and limited availability of pandemic influenza vaccines, antivirals and antibiotics, as well as common medical supplies for treatment of other illnesses;
- negative impact on social and economic activities of communities which could last long after the end of the pandemic period;
- intense scrutiny from the public, government agencies, and the media on the state of national preparedness; and
- a global emergency limiting the potential for international assistance. (WHO, 2009, pp. 13).

All these points are reflected in the spread of the virus itself, of the disease it causes, and in the increasing number of people infected, patients, and deaths. If, however, containment strategies prove effective in reducing or mitigating the advance of contagion, then the preparation of states for a possible pandemic will have been successful.

As we said in the previous section, opting for the hypothesis of unconscious creation to explain the pandemic introduces the class of diseases called zoonotic. The case of influenza is no exception. In these diseases, viruses from animals successfully infect humans. In some cases only small groups have been affected and the contagion has not grown to broader dimensions. The WHO warns that a pandemic –referring to influenza– occurs “when an animal influenza virus to which most humans have no immunity acquires the ability to cause sustained chains of human-to-human transmission leading to community-wide outbreaks. Such a virus has the potential to spread worldwide, causing a pandemic” (WHO, 2009, p. 16). For this to occur, the animal virus must be transformed into a virus of human influenza. As the WHO observed, this transformation occurs at the genetic level through two types of processes:

- genetic reassortment: a process in which genes from animal and human influenza viruses mix together to create a human-animal influenza reassortant virus;
- genetic mutation: a process in which genes in an animal influenza virus change allowing the virus to infect humans and transmit easily among them (WHO, 2009, p. 16).

One result of these processes – genetic reassortment or mutation– is that all animal viruses transmitted to humans are totally new;⁶ thus the response capacity of political and health authorities may be limited or ineffective. To clarify the development, progression, and evolution of a pandemic, and to indicate the most appropriate actions for reducing the contagion of a virus and disease propagation, the WHO (1999) established a series of phases that “are applicable to the entire world and provide a global framework to aid countries in pandemic preparedness and response planning” (WHO, 2009, p. 24). These phases are:

- Phase 1: No animal influenza virus circulating among animals has been reported to cause infection in humans.
- Phase 2: An animal influenza virus circulating in domesticated or wild animals is known to have caused infection in humans and is therefore considered a specific potential pandemic threat.
- Phase 3: An animal or human-animal influenza reassortant virus has caused sporadic cases or small clusters of disease in people, but has not resulted in human-to-human transmission sufficient to sustain community-level outbreaks.
- Phase 4: Human-to-human transmission (H2H) of an animal or human-animal influenza reassortant virus able to sustain community-level outbreaks has been verified.
- Phase 5: The same identified virus has caused sustained community level outbreaks in two or more countries in one WHO region.
- Phase 6: In addition to the criteria defined in Phase 5, the same virus has caused sustained community level outbreaks in at least one other country in another WHO region. (WHO, 2009, p. 11).

Once a pandemic is declared, reversing it is virtually impossible. The mechanisms of power can, at best, only regulate the phenomenon. To achieve this, member nation-states guide their actions by the WHO’s recommendations for controlling a pandemic, though without ever

⁶ Consider the declaration by the WHO’s General Director on the global expansion of the virus: “We had never seen a pandemic generated by a coronavirus. This is the first pandemic caused by a coronavirus” (WHO, 2020).

surrendering their sovereignty. The COVID-19 pandemic shows how biopower entrusted with controlling life is exercised not only by the State, but also by supranational organizations. It further reveals how the sovereign power of States can be regulated by biopower. In the name of life, State sovereignty is guided towards achieving a distinct goal: ensuring the safety of its population. The actions taken have brought a whole series of economic problems: low industrial productivity, reduced exports and imports of merchandise, and the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs, concerns that, like the virus itself, multiply across the planet.

d) Security and pandemic

In other words, with the population we have something completely different from a collection of subjects of rights differentiated by their status, localization, goods, responsibilities, and offices; [we have] a set of elements that, on one side, are immersed within the general regime of living beings and that, on another side, offer a surface on which authoritarian, but reflected and calculated transformations can get a hold.

M. Foucault, *Security, territory, population* (p. 104)

The effectiveness in identifying the phases of a pandemic can only be assessed by the measures implemented to provide security for the population. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the following actions have been required to achieve this goal: social distancing and immobilization, confinement in the home, closing national borders, shutting down businesses, industries, and non-essential production, halting tourism, suspending all types of spectacles (sports, concerts, etc.), working and schooling at home or remotely, continuous sanitization of public places and transport, creating temporary or provisional hospitals, transforming sites into cemeteries, insisting that people wash their hands and use masks and anti-viral gel, and refrain from hugging and kissing, and deploying the police to break up agglomerations. Though disparate and heterogeneous,

these measures involve norms designed to regulate the population, whether understood as a workforce, a source of wealth, or producers and consumers of resources. These actions are subsumed to the form of the body species; that is, its biological aspect. Following Foucault, the current SARS-CoV-2 pandemic evidences the functioning of norms and normalization; first, because the norm is an “element that will circulate between the disciplinary and the regulatory, which will also be applied to body and population alike, which will make it possible to control both the disciplinary order of the body and the aleatory events that occur in the biological multiplicity.” (Foucault, 2003, p. 252); second, because normalization or, perhaps better, the normalizing society, “is a society in which the norm of discipline and the norm of regulation intersect along an orthogonal articulation” (Foucault, 2003, p. 253). The aforementioned containment measures go hand-in-hand with this definition of the normalizing society.⁷

Today, facing the COVID-19 pandemic, Foucault’s analyses of security are more than opportune and suggestive, for he observes that “What is involved is the emergence of technologies of security within mechanisms that are either specifically mechanisms of social control, as in the case of the penal system, or mechanisms with the function of modifying something in the biological destiny of the species” (Foucault, 2007, p. 23). Because of the pandemic, the phrase “biological destiny of the species” takes on a completely different meaning when understood in its global or planetary dimension. On the one hand, we have the ravages of the virus on human lives (a second wave of contagion that brings more patients and deaths, or its conversion into an endemic virus like influenza H1N1); on the other, the consequences for society of the safety measures and apparatuses of security. In this sense, the pandemic is accompanied by devices of global security whose goal is to regulate a contagion and disease that is devastating the world’s population.

One of the main safety measures for confronting the virus is what Foucault called the “political technique that will be addressed to the milieu” (Foucault, 2007, p. 38). This consists, first, in considering the reality of circulation and, second, in pondering the environment as an opportune place that permits the effective development of circulation. As he notes, “security will try to plan a milieu in terms events or series of events or possible elements, of series that will have to be

⁷ For example, the strategy that the government calls “The new normality” (implemented 14 May 2020), when productive, commercial, and educational activities will be re-established only with full compliance of the obligatory sanitary measures for both spaces and individuals, supervised at all times to prevent bodies from becoming agents of transmission and contagion of the virus.

regulated in a multivalent and transformable framework” (Foucault, 2007, p. 35). The sanitary measures of confinement in the home, social immobilization, and border closings visibilize the reality that the whole planet has been transformed into a milieu that facilitates the circulation not only of people, but also of the virus. Indeed, by suspending circulation worldwide, these measures confirm that the milieu “is what is needed to account for action at a distance of one body on another. It is, therefore, the medium of an action and the element in which it circulates. It is, therefore, the problem of circulation and causality that is at stake in this notion of milieu” (Foucault, 2007, pp. 36). The disease and contagion caused by the virus reveals the action at a distance of one body on another, but also demonstrates that while humans are the receptacle of the virus, the milieu is what allows it to circulate with other things during its period of extra-corporal life. Hence:

The medium is a certain number of combined, overall effects beating on all who live in it. It is an element in which a circular link is produced between effects and causes, since an effect from one point of view will be a cause from another. For example, more overcrowding will mean more miasmas, and so more disease. More disease will obviously mean more deaths. More deaths will mean more cadavers, and consequently more miasmas, and so on. So it is this phenomenon of circulation of causes and effects that is targeted through the milieu (Foucault, 2007, p. 36).

To impede agglomerations or gatherings in industries, businesses, schools, and public spaces like markets, malls, bus stations, airports, parks, theaters, movie theaters, bars, and entertainment centers, political and health authorities had to establish policies designed to simultaneously limit people’s movement and reduce circulation. Reducing, impeding, or limiting the circulation of both people and the virus played an instrumented role in flattening the statistical curve of contagion and in preventing even more patients and deaths.

Finally, the fact that biopolitics must impose political techniques on the milieu to reduce the effects of the pandemic that is ravaging populations worldwide, shows that the milieu, as Foucault proposes, is related directly to human beings; that is, the body species. Here, safety –charged with modifying the biological destiny of the species– has modified and reconditioned the environment by functioning as a field of interventions that affects the population. Foucault wrote: “I mean a multiplicity of individuals who are and fundamentally and essentially only exist biologically bound to the materiality within which they live” (Foucault, 2007, p. 37). Through this aspect of biopower and

security devices, the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus has been reduced to a spatial problem in which the notion of environment, the action of circulation, and population –the latter understood in its biological aspect as a multiplicity of live beings– all play important roles.

e) The daily life of biopolitics

The measures and restrictions adopted worldwide exemplify the Foucauldian concepts of biopower and biopolitics expounded in this text, though in everyday becoming we find internal differences that diversify ways of understanding these concepts. Among Latin American countries there have been cases where the State applied the force of the police or army in public spaces to impose order and obedience of law through curfews. In Mexico, Hugo López-Gatell Ramírez, the Sub-secretary of Health Prevention and Promotion of the Ministry of Health, declared in a press conference on 24 April 2020 that the measures for combatting the pandemic did not target the population but, rather, economic structures like work, educational institutions, and recreational spaces that produce mobility. With its National Social Distancing Campaign (*sana distancia*) and the slogan “Stay at home” (*Quédate en casa*), the government urged people to assume co-responsibility in caring for themselves and others, and for the health centers provided by a financially-strapped national State. Recommendations regarding hygiene, school closures, and social isolation brought profound changes to the members of Mexican families that strongly impacted their daily lives and their bodies, coupled with widespread economic uncertainty and growing despondency as their normal conditions of life became increasingly vulnerable. The pandemic exposed not only global economic inequality, but also the tools of biopolitics that have been present, though invisible, for decades.

Institutional control of the body certainly proceeds through health institutions, but also through conditions derived from limited mobility and the total or partial paralysis of the economies of large corporations and entrepreneurs, even down to the level of local subsistence. Phrases like “if the virus doesn’t kill me, hunger will”, “we live hand-to-mouth”, “the virus doesn’t scare me, but hunger sure does”, echoed increasingly among such Mexicans as small business owners and street vendors whose very survival was in jeopardy. A true dilemma!

The body, corporality, and the somatic as biopolitical entities took on an everyday form and meaning. Obvious economic inequalities led to the introduction of new markers of population sectors: ‘irresponsibles’, ‘essential workers’, ‘heroes’. It became clear that the undervalued labors of garbage collectors, caretakers, food deliverymen, and nurses are actually essential services, not to mention the heroic acts of all the doctors who attend COVID-19 patients. In various public spheres discourses were modified, calling for the aperture of so-called essential services. A whole context was created in which the population changed its opinion regarding actions once deemed unpleasant or unacceptable and came to understand them as not only tolerable, but even desirable. Reprehensible, of course, are the series of physical attacks and threats against the personnel of health centers and acts of aggression against individuals who fail to wear masks or follow safety measures in public. An emblematic case emerged in the state of Jalisco with the death of Giovanni López, who was detained under excessive force by municipal police alleging that he was not wearing a mask in public. His death mobilized people on social networks and sparked protests in Mexico City and Guadalajara with the slogan “*Justice for Giovanni!*”⁸. The incident was met with social disapproval and was investigated by the competent authorities, but soon faded from the media due to the spreading contagion and rising death toll nationwide.

The authorities of the nation-state conceived citizens as allies, co-responsible for health and public order (Bordillo, 2020). The government’s approach to the pandemic is based, in general, on a process of instrumentalization that with the aid of new technologies seeks to ensure order and record people’s mobility at the world level and in neighborhoods with high numbers of confirmed cases of COVID-19. Suffice to see the banners on the streets and in local markets in Mexico City that announce “*Alert! Zone of high contagion*”⁹. To the rampant economic uncertainty we must add the distrust of government institutions and the scant information provided on the virus and how it is transmitted. Prevailing doubt about who may be asymptomatic carriers of the virus and, therefore, can unwittingly propagate it go hand-in-hand with the fact that a large part of Mexico’s population is unaware that they have diabetes or hypertension, or one of many other undetected comorbidities.

⁸See “Exigen #JusticiaParaGiovanni; este viernes, concentración en Casa Jalisco”, in Aristegui noticias 4 June 2020. Online <<https://aristeginoticias.com/0406/mexico/exigen-justiciaparagiovanni-este-viernes-concentracion-en-casa-jalisco/>>. 2020. Accessed 6 August 2020.

⁹ See *La Jornada*, 23 April 2020 <<https://www.jornada.com.mx/ultimas/capital/2020/04/23/se-alertara-con-carteles-de-201czonas-de-alto-contagio201d-en-cdmx-9600.html>>. Accessed 6 August 2020.

Doubt, uncertainty, ignorance, and disinformation are the variables of biopower and biopolitics in times of pandemic for a population whose emotional health is increasingly being compromised. Living conditions, especially those related to inhabiting space, are another facet of the precarization of work that problematizes the organization of cities and of people who live in the reduced spaces of low-cost housing with poor ventilation, totally inadequate for current conditions that, while hardly recent, evidence how the lives of certain subjects are impoverished, lives that some governments are willing to dispense with; disposable lives of no importance due to migratory status, skin color, religious affinity, sexual preference, or economic status. Other aspects of precarization that affect large sectors of the population are consumption capacity and, especially, indebtedness¹⁰.

The concepts problematized by Foucault are theoretical, but they enter into discussion today for they are visible in our everyday actions or inactions. We experience the impact of biopolitics on our lives, on our bodies, and on our ways of understanding the world. Its most recent device is a humanizing of the virus that portrays it as a common enemy of planetary dimensions that must be defeated by nationalist discourses, reinforced borders, the issuing of immunity cards, and support for local economies, while shifting responsibility to small groups of family, friends, and potential networks of solidarity woven with neighbors and the nation-state. Self-regulation through conviction (or convincing) seems to be efficient in controlling the population, complemented by the economicist strategy of advancing through the pandemic by supporting large corporations to achieve national salvation. As Jean Comaroff (2020) writes, healing the economy as a simile of salvation from the pandemic at the cost of the lives of the most vulnerable people –in terms both economic and of health– is the gamble that some nation-states are taking.

CONCLUSION

¹⁰ See the examples in Maurizio Lazzarato (2013), *La fábrica del hombre endeudado. Ensayo sobre la condición neoliberal*. Edit. Amorrortu; David Graeber (2012), *En deuda. Una historia alternativa de la economía*. Edit. Ariel.

It is paradoxical, in light of its etymology, that in times of pandemic¹¹ people are separated, fragmented, and isolated in their integrated fields by policies that promote and insist upon social distancing, immobilization, and confinement in the home. Moreover, analyses of the pandemic have replaced the figure of ‘people’ with that of ‘population’. This can only be explained through biopolitics, which takes the latter as its object of intervention. Likewise, the idea of ‘people’ understood as a political subject or subject of rights is traded for that of the body species, which understands humans as living beings. Facing the pandemic, biopower –through the anatomo-politics of the body and the biopolitics of population– achieves the goal of ensuring, maintaining, and developing life despite contagion, disease, and death; a goal that can only be attained by controlling bodies, of both individuals and populations, immersed in mechanisms of power that aim to strengthen them, make them grow, and subject them to order. As we have demonstrated, even during this exceptional event called pandemic, biopower invades life completely.

Just as in the 18th century when diseases were classified as epidemic or endemic phenomena that decimated the populations of countries or regions, in the 20th century, according to publications by the WHO and analyses of zoonotic diseases, the term pandemic is applied to a phenomenon in which a virus that acquired the ability to cause chains of human-to-human transmission gains the potential to spread across the globe. In this case, Tedros Adhanom, the Director General of the WHO, declared the COVID-19 disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus a pandemic on 11 March 2020.

The declaration of the pandemic led countries around the world to implement security technologies with the objective of modifying nothing less than the biological destiny of the species. To achieve this, as Foucault’s analyses show, a key step was identifying that in order to combat the virus policies promoting social distancing, immobilization, and confinement in the home had to reduce, or at least limit, the worldwide circulation of people. By impeding circulation these measures sought to limit dissemination of the virus, hoping this would lessen contagion and the numbers of patients and deaths. But the political techniques applied also had to modify and recondition the environment so as to affect the population.

From our insistence on the biological reality of the species and the global character of the pandemic one could infer the planetary expansion and fixing of the biological identity of the species

¹¹ See the entry “Pandemic”, dictionary of the RAE: πανδημία: παν (pan, all) – δῆμος (demos, pueblo): reunion of all a people.

and its reflection in the characteristic policies of biopolitics. Just as the State implants a national identity in its citizens¹², so does biology with the species. In contrast, the national identity, committed to its history, imposes an origin and destiny on its citizens from which it is virtually impossible to escape (*i.e.*, being Mexican, Spanish, French, Brazilian, Argentinian, Chinese, Japanese, etc.), while biology imprints a unique identity that is ever more difficult to set aside. On the one hand, the State fixes, and cautiously watches over, the national identity through various processes – birth certificates, passports, driver’s licenses, etc.– while biology does likewise with human beings through comparative anatomy, physiology, and genetic mapping, among other means. Against the plurality of nationalities produced by States, biology establishes and imposes a unique biological identity. Today, as the SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 pandemic shows, each State is responsible for governing the biological substrate of its citizens according to the utility and force it can extract using the only justification available to it: health. Under the imposition of this unique biological identity, individuals respond in different ways: some recognizing themselves (once again) as God’s children, others seeking to transcend the biological through technological means, still others striving to disembody themselves in virtual worlds. These are just some of the ways in which people may find escape from this extreme biological determination. Perhaps one of the most urgent political tasks to be undertaken entails nothing less than abjuring both identities: national and biological. After all, humans must learn something about viruses and their relation to them: the reality of mutation. Politics will take as one of its imperatives that of at least mutating these identities. We must remain attentive to learnings regarding deaths and the forms of life that emerge into this still pandemic world.

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