Covid-19 and Resistance in Brazil: Life-Making, Memory, and Challenges in Seeding an Alternative Future

written by Rhaysa Ruas | August 25, 2020

When COVID-19 – a pandemic caused by a pathogen that sprouted from the very conditions through which our capitalist societies produce food and deal with nature – was announced as a reality in Rio de Janeiro on March 13th, our concerns were focused on growing police killings, lack of water in various working-class neighborhoods, and an increasing unemployment rate at a national level of 12.2% (around 12.9 million of people), this in a labor market where informal work comprises as much as 41% of all workers and where many of the unemployed are therefore not counted.

Austerity politics were on track, putting forward a project of deeper privatization, financialization, income concentration, and social exclusion. State budgets for social expenses such as health and education have been frozen until 2036, according to a constitutional amendment approved in 2016. An escalating political crisis that involved all levels of state power was also part of this atmosphere.

Very quickly, the political crisis – at the center of which was the battle between President Jair Bolsonaro and the Congress and the Supreme Court – turned also into an internal fight between the President and his own ministers, including the former Minister of Health. Whilst the latter was inclined to follow World Health Organization (WHO) directives, Bolsonaro insisted on denying the full existence of the virus while also calling public demonstrations against democracy. As I am writing this report, Brazil reached more than 50 thousand COVID deaths – second highest in the world – and, after several splits in the government, Bolsonaro has not even nominated ministers for education, culture, or health.

Although the corporate mass media has been positioning itself on the side of “science,” highlighting a degree of concern for public health, unequal social realities have been more naturalized than really addressed. The media showed three main general concerns regarding virus contamination. First, came the virus’s quick pace as it spreads in favelas and peripheries, where it is far from uncommon for a whole family to share a one-room house, with a lack of sanitation, clean water and other infrastructure. Importantly, when the federal government offered an emergency aid of USD 112.96 per month for the poor – after proposing the ridiculous amount of USD 37.65 per month ending with a political battle with the left in Congress – it was 8 times less than the necessary salary calculated for the basic market basket, USD 868.94. This process also revealed the further extension of the reality of social marginalization, since many of those requesting the benefit faced real

challenges in requesting it, such as no internet access or required documentation (basic citizen ID), not to mention the unreasonable delays in payments – issues which were once more naturalized.

The second concern was Brazil's prison system, containing the third biggest population in the world. Here, the scenario of general human rights violations and lack of infrastructure would create a dramatic effect that could go outside its walls. Importantly, the general concern on the part of the dominant media was not with human beings stuck there to die (even if 41,5% of them have no criminal convictions), but the fear that COVID could spread outside its walls, for which the measures taken – prohibition of family visits and no policy for guaranteeing their health or well-being – are illustrative.

A third concern, less noticed and even less addressed, was Indigenous and Quilombola people's vulnerability to contamination, including the more isolated communities that were already suffering constant invasions and attacks increasingly legitimized by the Bolsonaro administration. Again, much more was said than done, since no state policy was directed at them and the virus got there through the same roads opened by the invaders. Those invasions are part of a bigger complex scenario of conflicts and disputes over land, such as the looting of Amazon forest – another project driven by Bolsonaro.

Although mainstream media, NGOs, and civil society – mostly rooted in the liberal-oriented, progressive middle classes – showed a degree of preoccupation with the so-called social question, far less was said when the first COVID death in Rio de Janeiro was a domestic worker, a Black woman residing in a peripherical area, who was infected after being forced to work in her employers' house even after they had returned from Italy with symptoms. Considered to be essential workers and with few or no labor rights, domestic workers, such as maids, nannies and housekeepers kept working in precarious situations with no support and very little concern for them or their families' health.

II. Building survival strategies in trenches…

When a Black man named George Floyd was brutally murdered in the U.S. by the Minneapolis Police Department on May 25th, we had already counted 23.522 COVID deaths in Brazil and at least 606 police murders in Rio de Janeiro State alone, of which 78% victims were Black. What is shocking is that even after a severe social isolation decree, police brutality against Black people continued to increase: In April 2020, there were 43% more such killings than at the same time last year. Meanwhile, during the months of April and May 2020, the state of Rio de Janeiro increased the volume of police operations, allegedly meant to crack down on drug trafficking, by 27.9%. This produced 53% more deaths than in the same period of the previous year. Floyd's murder vocalized again a slogan that shows the worldwide working-class's most recurrent feeling: WE CAN'T BREATHE.

We cannot breathe because capitalism as a system is unbreathable. In regulating our access to the means of subsistence, thereby forging the specific kind of precarious, disciplined life that is necessary to maintain capital's drive for profit, capitalism is a death-making system. What can we do when a system like that is revealed for the whole society? How not to let this historical opportunity opened by US popular revolt and the appearance of COVID-19 – a neoliberal pandemic – vanish into a re-naturalization of capitalist barbarism, i.e. "going back to normal"? More concretely, how to live and make a living in a world like that? At the current juncture, all our political work seems to be limited to harm-reduction actions, but it is our duty as Marxists to make sense of those contradictions and push them forward.

For instance, just as U.S. antiracist demonstrations have a core anti-capitalist and antiimperialist potentiality – since they stand against a state that brings inside its territory the same kind of military

occupation that is carried out by its troops abroad, with curfews, police brutality and so on – they also have double imperialist impacts on countries like Brazil. U.S. imperialism manifests itself in both violent and not always explicit forms, with a very marked cultural component that involves posing as a symbol of democracy and freedom while exporting militarization and forms of punitive discipline through its transnational industrial-military-prison complex.

At this juncture, Brazilian white elites felt compelled to adopt an antiracist language and position – with our biggest TV broadcasters inviting Black journalists to speak on their main news programs – progressive sectors were divided between (1) those grasping the moment in less radical terms, from a rights/equality language perspective and wanting to reproduce U.S. political struggles and demonstrations in terms of expanding the politics of inclusion and diversity, and (2) those who understood the revolts in their anticapitalistic dimension and wanted to use the conjuncture to push forward a more radical project here in Brazil.

The current institutional left generally held the first position, and during the electoral calendar for municipalities and senates, maintained an agenda of trying to advance Blacks, women, and LGBTQI+ people in power positions. This is the platform adopted by the left parties represented in Congress, with the support of progressive NGOs. Guiding its politics by the electoral contest with no real alternative project for transcending current social relations, the bigger socialist party (PSOL) called timidly for industrial reconversion, while focusing – equally timidly – on a call for Bolsonaro's parliamentary impeachment. They left out any call for the taxation of big fortunes, for example.

In the second, more radical position, we can find grassroots collectives and social movements from favelas and peripheral areas – mostly Black and Indigenous. But within a political and economic context like the one described above, they are also the ones who are carrying the burden of guaranteeing working class survival, especially in favelas, villages and peripheries. This sector, composed of several collectives, spontaneous mutual aid networks/actions, community-based organizations, and supported by few non-electoral/revolutionary socialist parties or anarchist organizations, are comrades who are planting the seeds for a possible alternative future.

They do so at a high personal cost for their activists and their own organizing. Nevertheless, since the very beginning of social isolation, it is the Black favelas' youth, organized in collectives, that are in the frontline of the fight against the virus and its social effects. They work to guarantee not only the basic means of subsistence to majority of poor families, but also information about the virus and how to prevent it. Many were spontaneous mutual aid initiatives, although this sector also comprised important collectives that have been confronting state violence in the frontline of antiracist struggles of the past years.

In my view, we can classify the urban working-class mobilization during the pandemic, i.e., resistance through solidarity for survival, into two big groups: actions of political pedagogy (education, advocacy and mobilization) and actions aimed at guaranteeing the reproduction of life (life-making actions). In the first group, we can locate 1) the dissemination of information and fighting against widespread government fake news, 2) the work of popular communicators in informing people how to act in case of COVID-19 deaths and domestic violence, 3) collecting frontline workers reports and then helping to denounce and protest over issues like the lack of PPE's, 4) institutional advocacy work regarding state's accountability and to stop police violence, 5) mothers and parents of state violence victims demanding state accountability, 6) human rights protections and immediate liberation of imprisoned people, also putting forward a prison abolition movement, 7) online political organizing and education, with online classes and debates; and finally 8) organizing public street demonstrations.

In the second sector we can locate actions like 1) getting individual and institutional donations in

order to distribute food, clean water, hygiene kits, etc., 2) giving health and funeral support in favelas, villages and peripheries, where those state services do not reach, 3) guaranteeing survival in prisons and detention centers, including within the socio-educative system. The collectives also organized to sanitize the streets in favelas, since the state refuses to do so to the full extent that is needed in those communities. They also responded to the fact that most people in those areas had difficulties maintaining social isolation (recall that those are the neighborhoods where many of the essential workers live, e.g., cleaners and janitors, domestic workers, care givers, food makers, and transportation services).

What can all those movements – and Brazilian reality – bring us in terms of conceptualizing/thinking revolution/social transformation? If/how does it connect to the US uprisings?

Brazilian mutual aid actions maintain in their daily praxis a long tradition of popular solidarity and dual power in areas where the state historically has been present only through military/punitive force. Since colonial times, Blacks, Indigenous people and the working poor created and lived in autonomous territories. While they were more and more subsumed by capital, even today we have areas where the state does not penetrate very much, and self-organization is a general form.

Key examples include many Indigenous and Quilombola communities and Black communitarian organizing, especially in favelas whose history often confuses itself with urban Quilombos (although in favelas, as organized crime more and more keeps close relations with the state, this has become rarer over the years). This has happened either by communities' resistance and the possibility of keeping isolated or through the lack of a state presence as a social insecurity mediator in those communities. Right now, for example, there are self-organized Indigenous self-defense groups, such as Guardiões da Floresta (Forest Guardians), that are defending their territories in regions such as the Amazon from looting and deforestation by direct confrontation with invaders, as well as illegal hunters, lodges, gold miners, and so on.

In general, Latin America has a lot of autonomist experiences, most notably the Zapatista movement, which furnish us with lessons about how to keep police and the state out of daily life-making. Many of those autonomist experiences recover, maintain and/or preserve Indigenous, African and Specific Latin American cosmogonies, which bring to the movements' center another relationship between human beings and nature, and of the particular and the universal, where life-making is not driven by profit-making. Also present in some of those experiences is the understanding that police or state control is not only an objective institution, but also a relationship, an historical and ongoing process.

I would also like to call attention to the fact that the kind of debates raised worldwide after George Floyd's murder and the popular revolts that exploded in the US were already being addressed on a daily basis here, from defunding and abolishing the police to abolishing prisons and fighting against anti-Black genocide, to dual power experiences. Those kinds of debates are already an urgent issue, a key demand, and a part of a long-lasting reflection in the whole of Latin America. Riots with cars and buildings burning after a killing committed by the police are a recurrent reality for activists from Rio and São Paulo favelas, although almost never broadcast in the mass media, which is completely controlled by corporate or state interests.

Nor are such issues supported by the middle classes. But while the U.S. uprisings show the limits of a Black politics of inclusion and diversity, pointing in a more radicalized, anti-capitalist direction, Brazil's left strategy tends still to reinforce an old politics limited to inclusion/diversity. Can Brazil's grassroots and spontaneous mutual aid movements not only point this out, but also put forward an alternative direction?

It is not by coincidence that while the LA police department – one of the most lethal in the US –

killed 601 people in the last 7 years, with just one criminal conviction, Rio de Janeiro police killed 606 people from last January to May 2020, with no convictions at all. Here, I do not bring Brazilian particularity to this debate in order to do an Othering, or simply to measure it quantitatively as worse or better than US reality. I bring it up because paying attention to the particularity of Brazil's dependent capitalism helps us understand better the deeply racialized and gendered logic of global capitalism without reifying the US imperial character and role within it.

As I mentioned earlier, police brutality and a genocidal public security policy made "staying at home" even more impossible for most residents of favelas, with constant shootings and police operations. On May 20, an 18-year-old Black man was killed during a food distribution action at Cidade de Deus. The group was stuck in the middle of the shooting and recorded everything. Jota Marques, a comrade from Frente Cidade de Deus, told a local newspaper that when they questioned the police who did not want to let them go during the shooting, a policeman shouted, "If they didn't want to be shot down, they should not leave their homes without having a Bible on their hands".

Finally, on May 31 after the brutal murder of two more Black teenagers in Rio – inside their own houses – we had our first public demonstration: "Black and Favelas' Lives Matter: stop killing us". This demonstration was organized from the night into the day, when those favela activists decided that it was impossible to continue in the way they had been. The call for the demonstration stated: "We went to the streets because they came to kill us at home." The demonstration took place in front of the governor's palace, and although it was very peaceful and lasted only 1 hour – a decision of the movements that organized it in order to diminish COVID propagation and avoid confrontations with the police – the police still reacted with brutality, leaving one injured and another arrested. One week later, on June 7, we had another, bigger and more organized demonstration, this time in Rio's downtown.

This time the police were more organized. With horses and military tanks in the streets and with a ratio of 2-3 police per demonstrator, they tried to curtail the protest, threatening civilians with their display of force and military power, arresting 40 people for no legal reason (with the excuse that they had sanitizer in their possession), forbidding the use of megaphones, making unauthorized personal searches, and encircling the protest. With the mass media covering the whole demonstration and its taking place in broad daylight, no real confrontation happened, but the police nonetheless sent a message of intimidation.

Even more concerning was the reaction of civil society to those brave and significant demonstrations. Many leftist intellectuals and activists, NGO members, artists, and digital influencers urged collectives in favelas to step back from organizing demonstrations. Their pressures included social media posts against the demonstrations. Their main argument was the possibility of those demonstrations giving Bolsonaro the excuse he needed to finally proceed with the expected military coup and formally close Congress and the Supreme Court. Others pointed to the fear that if we had more radical protests like in the U.S., we could have had a civil war, since this would give Bolsonaro reasons to fully liberate the right to carry guns in an already polarized civil society. Finally, a considerable part of the older generation of the Black movement warned that demonstrations could increase the spread of COVID in a scenario where we already have crowded hospitals and have not yet reached the peak of the pandemic, which would increase mortality within an already fragmented Black community.

All those positions revealed an incorrect understanding of the workings of political formations and the meaning of power, since they grasp political power neither as a concentrated phenomenon nor as a social relation in an ongoing, historical process. Instead, they treat power as diffuse and "the coup" as an event in search of a cause. This is further evidence for the needed retheorization of capitalism and a work of rescuing radical concepts and the diffusion of revolutionary theory within

Brazilian society.

III. ...but trying to think beyond capitalism: what alternative?

How to think about policing as a social relation? In a similar vein, how to put forward a call for defunding the police and reinvesting in social welfare, in a dependent capitalist and deeply militarized country? Is it possible to apply the same calls for defunding the police and reinvesting in social programs to dependent capitalist states like Brazil, considering the ways imperialist countries export their social problems and feed their welfare systems with Global South resources, blood, and sweat? What about US imperialism and the global system of militarization?

More concretely, how can we abolish the police without creating a situation where private militias and death squads – already a part of Brazilian history as the origin of the police institution itself and now as parallel organizations with deep connections with this same institution, and with the state and dominant classes in general – could proliferate, undermining even more possibilities for civil society to control and denounce abuses, thus aggravating Black and Indigenous genocide? Finally, how to understand anti-Black genocide both in Brazil and the U.S.? Do they have similar meanings and processes?

In Brazil, as in other dependent economies, the super-exploitation of labor – the lengthening and intensification of the working day and the payment of wages below the normal value of the labor-power necessary for worker's subsistence and reproduction – is systemic. This raises several questions about the character of Brazil's citizenship model and to what extent racial structural inequalities cannot be diminished. Households, communities, and favelas serve as the main site that compensate for the lack of income necessary to guarantee daily subsistence. These communities thus become crucial sites of struggle for living standards and of resistance against capitalist exploitation. As a result, they also become the target of state violence. Gender and race relations thus help produce the devaluation of certain social groups and guarantee the reproduction of exploitation and expropriation.

In this scenario, one of the most pressing needs for retheorization in light of the experience of Rio's more radical social movements seems to be the relationship between anti-Black violence and capitalism (the capitalist quest for value). An understanding of capitalism as social totality can also help us avoid a reading of racism and anti-Black genocide that reproduces a dualistic framework, according to which it happens because Black people are completely disposable for capitalism, since we constitute "surplus" labor power. Predominant in contemporary literature, these readings are not only wrong, but mystify the very workings of capitalist society, by using a functionalist explanation – Black people's so-called disposability under capitalist system – to explain anti-Black genocide. Against this, I argue: we are killed precisely because we are indispensable for this system's functioning, and it is by producing differences in the access to means of subsistence and conditions of exploitation that capitalism produces the forms of life necessary for its own sociality.

As I see it here, following social reproduction theorists, there is a contradictory relationship of dependency between the capitalist system and life's production processes and institutions: the existence of capitalism depends as much on the production of a healthy and fit global working class as on the maximum exhaustion of the individual worker within a particular nation state. In the course of the process of an inherently expansionary accumulation of capital, the capitalist class seeks to stabilize the reproduction of the labor force at a low cost and with a minimum of reproductive labor.

This means, concretely, the reproduction of human life in destructive conditions, so that capitalism builds the life it needs; it replaces bodily life, incarnated, with an alienated form of social life,

through a process of abstraction such as that presented in the transformation of concrete labor into abstract labor. In this process, historically constituted along gendered and racialized lines, the level of access to resources for the reproduction of life determines the fate of the working class as a whole, also determining the specific forms of resistance of the different fractions that compose it.

Now, although there is a tendency towards the total subsumption of human labor under capital, against this continuous tendency of compression and destruction of the means of production of life, the working class, "as a unified or fragmented force in sectors in competition, strives to conquer the best possible conditions for its renewal," and thus subsumption is never total.

In this sense, all capitalist societies produce and reproduce constantly their own "Negro" and that is why we cannot combat genocide with inclusion and diversity politics, as it generates nothing but the reorganization of a social hierarchy that will produce its own new "Negro" in the future. How to think about this in Brazil, where Black people are more than a half of the total population? Here, a discussion about dependent capitalism and the specifically Brazilian social formation can be very important and illustrative, but this is rarely carried out.

I am not excluding the importance of the politics of inclusion, and even less am I suggesting that we return to a dualist debate, reviving old polemics around recognition vs. redistribution. For me it is clear that recognition is an integral part of class struggles/politics. What I am saying is that when we allow inclusion to become our only focus, guided by an idealistic U.S. civil rights model and without grasping the specific workings of capitalist social forms such as the State or Law, this politics turns quickly into its opposite. We cannot expect to combat a centuries-old ongoing genocide by idealizing a social or welfare state that never existed fully even in imperialist countries. Thus, the only way we can support, even critically, the fight for inclusion is as a tactic.

But in posing the politics of inclusion and diversity as a tactical objective, we must protect and support the most radical movements within it. Making concessions, whether morally or discursively (against looting for example) is not only to help send our brothers and sisters to death but it also buries the concrete possibility of a better future for all. Such concessions are guided by a wrong interpretation of the State and the Law: as if we could change their own structural logic by just changing chess pieces. This ignores how the structures themselves are (only relatively) autonomous under capitalism to the extent they are reproduced "on the individual's backs." By crystalizing historical social praxis, incorporating them into the state's own ideological and bureaucratic structures, these structures can easily limit even the most radical political leader or demand by individuals or groups, turning them into their opposite while adapting them to their own logic.

The systemic challenges being faced, and the multiple forms of resistance (and survival) through solidarity found within the Brazilian working class during the COVID-19 pandemic, point toward the need for a retheorization not only of a broader antifascist and antiracist struggle, but also to the theorization of a real alternative to capitalism. The present seeds of unity between antifascist and antiracist struggles in Brazil have the potential to move us toward a deeper understanding of capitalism that can radicalize current democratic struggles.

To be sure, we should keep to a formal democratic openness contra Bolsonaro, for it is fundamental to determining future modes/capacity of working-class organization. But our organizing to maintain democracy cannot be done in idealistic or narrow terms. It is not by chance that it is difficult to get the masses to support democracy when most of them have never really lived or experienced it. It's most difficult to convince people of the need to restore funding to the state when the state means only violence and corruption to many. But is this the only possibility for resistance, or there are others that can push us forward in the direction of a real social change?

As Peter Hudis points out, capitalism has already shown that all it "can offer the future of humanity are social and natural conditions that are bound to become worse than those afflicting us today." As a Black Marxist-feminist, I believe that if there is a future, it depends on the immediate social reorganization of life and production. As a Marxist-Humanist, I understand that this is only possible through the transcendence of alienation and of the form of value/social-property relations.

What can we do concretely right now towards the abolition of capitalism? I am arguing that in order to transcend alienation and the social division of labor, i.e., transcend value, what we actually need is a daily and permanent revolution. This can transpire only if we collectively raise our consciousness to the extent of being self-reflexive every second of our lives, in all of their aspects: moral, ethical, religious, questioning all our beliefs and the very way we treat people, all of this together.

Given the totality of this system, how to be anti-racist? How to be anti-fascist? How to be anti-sexist? How to be anti-capitalist? Problematize everything, doubt, and question everything. Racialize and gender all discussions. Look for information. Hear and support those who are in the frontline of the struggles. Understand your history and your own experiences as integral to a broader class experience in its diversity, in light of a global capitalist system. But this cannot be merely a self-help program; it needs to be done at the level of political organization and be constitutive of multiple positionalities without losing sense of the totality they constitute in their diversity. The pandemic, the revelation of essential workers/life-making work and the solidarity chain it raises all across the world gives us a new condition of possibility in this direction.

How can we begin to move current resistance actions further? First: we need to archive our praxis and make sense of our collective radically-built knowledge. In other words, we need to make sense of our history in a collective way, not only in a formal academic sense, but also transcending it through the voices and experiences of the "uncertified", the mass of ordinary people whose stories and lives are uncounted (independent if they had access to formal education or not), as Choudry and Vally put it. I am referring here to the radical and revolutionary political experiences of Black people, Indigenous people and the working poor in the Brazilian social formation, more specifically to the experiences of spontaneous and "uncertified" sectors of the working-class.

This must be an intra-class project, a project that, by making sense of all standpoints within the working class – through the recognition of the social totality involving all social relations of oppression and exploitation in which their form of appearance seems to be autonomous –, but with none as hegemonic, actually fights on a daily basis against attempts by the bourgeois standpoint make itself dominant, imposing already existing social forms. It cannot be intra-race, it cannot be intra-gender, but it must be intra-working-class, because although racism and sexism as forms of prejudice are deeply built into different fractions of the class, and thus of its consciousness, those oppressive relationships can be transcended only by concrete common struggle and political change over time.

On the other hand, racism and sexism as differential forms of exploitation and expropriation – i.e., oppression that impede sectors of the working class's access to their means of subsistence and production – are overdetermined by class differences that impede this common struggle itself. This is because, while the struggle ignores those deep class differences – concrete social-property relationships – the intra-race-only or intra-gender-only struggle necessarily move from common concerns to individual ones, just as property moved from common to individual, where capitalistic individual social-property relations tend to subsume the conditions of possibility of broader collective struggles for collective forms of social-property relations.

The recent post-independence history of many African countries, for example, can illustrate how new

Black and Indigenous dominant classes can be easily formed even when deeply political, anti-colonial struggles are taking place. Again, this is not to make a class-first claim but to recover the idea that classes exist only in concrete terms, i.e., in a racialized and gendered way and vice-versa, both in Brazilian or any other specific forms of capitalism.

By the year 2020, we, proletarians of the whole world, have had enough working-class organizing experiences within the State and the Law to collectively make sense of this process and to advance. And for the first time, we are so closely connected that we can easily archive those experiences in a transnational way. Thus, we have no need, given all the technological advances and transnational connections we already have, to still conceiving narrow national solutions to global problems or to be constantly repeating formulas that went wrong everywhere else in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, because "maybe they would fit since our reality is different."

On one hand, we need to find our own ways, by analyzing our own people and their challenges – which is, as Frantz Fanon tell us, a huge challenge to the colonized, because the first and very deep issue is to recognize ourselves: "Who am I?". On the other, we need to connect and reflect those paths to a broad, transnational context, accounting for other specific paths to the same goal. Those questions can only be answered – and the solutions can only be found – by creating our future by facing the injustices of our global, common, past.