

The Coronavirus Pandemic and the Far Right: Notes from the Lockdown in a Bottle Thrown into the Ocean

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“The theater, like the plague, is a crisis which is resolved by death or cure. And the plague is a superior disease because it is a total crisis after which nothing remains except death or an extreme purification. Similarly, the theater is a disease because it is the supreme equilibrium which cannot be achieved without destruction. It invites the mind to share a delirium which exalts its energies; and we can see, to conclude, that from the human point of view, the action of theater, like that of plague, is beneficial, for, impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world; it



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shakes off the asphyxiating inertia of matter which invades even the clearest testimony of the senses; and in revealing to collectivities of men their dark power, their hidden force, it invites them to take, in the face of destiny, a superior and heroic attitude they would never have assumed without it.”

Antonin Artaud¹

¹ ARTAUD, Antonin: *The Theater and the Plague*, in *The Theater and Its Double*, translated from the French by Mary Caroline Richards, New York: Grove Press, 1958.

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At the moment of writing this text, 22,165 deaths have been registered from Covid-19 in Brazil, and the number of infections stands at 349,113. The country is second in the world in terms of its number of confirmed cases, behind only the US. However, the level of testing in Brazil is far lower than that advised by the WHO, so we don't have a clear idea of the size of the epidemic – and that is in fact the government's strategy. Under-reporting of deaths from Covid-19 is high, and Brazil has barely tested 1 per cent of a population of nearly 209 million people. That is roughly 65 tests per 100,000 people. Some studies maintain that the numbers in the country are seven times higher than officially reported. Two Health Ministers have left office since the beginning of the crisis: one was dismissed by the President, while the other resigned. The Interim Minister is an army general who took part in a street demonstration in support of the government (!), thereby going against the advice of the WHO. We are blind amidst the chaos.

I am writing this text on the day of Saint Sara-la-Kali, who in popular Christianity is a divinity who protects errant peoples, and the patron saint of the Roma. In Brazil, Saint Sara-la-Kali is celebrated and worshiped more in the *umbanda* and *candomblé terreiros*² than in the Catholic churches. Such are our diasporic and colonial complexities. It is Sunday today, and cloudy. Autumn in Rio de Janeiro, which was once known as the 'wonderful city' (or 'cidade maravilhosa'), is always pleasant, with temperatures ranging between 22 and 30 degrees. More than six million people live here. The city of Rio de Janeiro is the capital of the state of the same name, which is home to 17.2 million people. So far there have been 33,589 confirmed cases of Covid-19 in the city, and 2,657 deaths. The number of confirmed cases is quickly increasing, and the projections of researchers from the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro estimate that by the beginning of June the number of infections could rise to 40,000. But nobody can predict when the peak of the pandemic will be reached.

Rio de Janeiro is the Brazilian city with the highest number of people living in favelas. 1,393,314 people live in 763 favelas; this equates to 22.03 per cent of the overall population. It is easy to imagine how difficult it is to implement isolation measures in these locations. It is virtually impossible, not only because of the population density or the absence of a sanitation system, but also because the people who live there make up a huge 'mass' of informal labor. They are the 'uberized' workers, the domestic

workers who provide services at the homes of the well-off, the *motoboys* working in the delivery business, the supermarket cashiers, the cooks and waiters at the bars and restaurants... They are also essential services workers, who are on the frontline of this particular crisis: nurses, and those who care for the elderly. These are the people who cannot stop working and who are therefore more exposed to the virus.

Furthermore, these districts have been affected for over four decades by ongoing armed conflicts between the police force and arms and drug traffickers. In recent times many of them have been taken over by militias associated with politicians and neo-Pentecostal priests. One of these militias was behind the killing in cold blood of the young city councilor Marielle Franco in Rio city center on March 14th, 2018. We could call it a veiled civil war. According to the government's data, 1,810 people died in these armed conflicts in 2018 alone. During the gubernatorial election campaign in late 2018, Wilson Witzel, who would eventually win, promised that:

"The police are going to aim at the head and... shoot."

In Brazil, necropolitics is the government's policy.

Even in the midst of the catastrophic health crisis caused by coronavirus, police operations (coordinated by the governor) did not stop. On May 18th, 14-year-old João Pedro Mattos was killed by the police, inside his home, in front of his family, during an operation at the Complexo de Salgueiro in São Gonçalo. Policemen took his body without his family's consent, and it was found two days later in a refrigerator at the city's morgue. On May 20th, 18-year-old João Victor was killed by the police during another operation, while he was packing food aid baskets in the community where he lived in Cidade de Deus, Rio de Janeiro... It has to be said over and over again to be believed.

This last week hasn't been easy. On Friday May 22nd, when Brazil's death toll from Covid-19 reached 20,000, fragments of a video were released showing a meeting between the far-right President Jair Bolsonaro and his ministers.³ I won't go into details about the dangers of the government's denial of the coronavirus crisis, since they have already been discussed, with disbelief, by media outlets around the world. The degree of cynicism, fanaticism and callousness showed by all members of

government, and clearly visible at that meeting, was another blow to our mental health. At no point in the meeting was the tragedy of the Covid-19 deaths mentioned. Instead we saw a horror show of jokes, swearwords and a lack of respect for Brazilian institutions and authorities.

In one of the fragments Bolsonaro can be seen defending the idea that the population should be armed, to enable them to reject the lockdown that could soon be implemented. In his own words:

"See how easy it is to impose a dictatorship in Brazil. That's why I'd like the people to be armed, as a guarantee that no son of a bitch may appear and impose a dictatorship. The fucker writes a decree which handcuffs and locks everyone at home. If they were armed, they'd take the streets. If I were a dictator, I would take the arms from them, as has always been done in the past. [...] A damn message for those fuckers: I'm arming the people because I don't want a dictatorship, there's no way to escape that. Whoever doesn't accept my flags – family, god, Brazil, weapons, freedom of expression, free market... – whoever doesn't accept them is in the wrong government."

The President is inciting the population to civil war. Is that a crime? It is indeed.

The government's strategies also became apparent, as did the fact that the ministerial body is composed of individuals filled with resentment and prone to authoritarian behavior as a result (this was also the case under Hitler, Mussolini and Franco). Such resentful ministers don't understand the responsibilities of the departments they lead, and oppose the policies their ministries should be defending. This is the surreal nature of the fascist Brazilian tragedy. Environment Minister Ricardo Salles, a well-known lobbyist for agrobusiness, said:

"We must make an effort during this moment of calm in terms of press coverage, while they are only talking about Covid, to 'pass the herd', change the rules and simplify the norms for the Iphan, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Environment Ministry, and this or that ministry."⁴

Is this a vile strategy? Does it incite the political administration to commit crimes? It is, it does.

Abraham Weintraub, the Minister for Education and one of the most fanatic individuals in the government, spelled out:

³ The fragments are available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2020/05/22/confira-a-integra-da-degravacao-da-reuniao-ministerial-de-22-de-abril.htm> (last accessed on May 24th, 2020).

⁴ 'Passar a boiada' was the original expression, here in literal translation. The idiom 'Where there's room for a cow, there's room for a herd' ('Onde passa o boi, passa a boiada') indicates the possibility of forcing through a large number of individuals or actions in one go. Iphan is the Brazilian institute for historical and artistic patrimony.

² *Terreiros* are the sacred places of *umbanda* and *candomblé*, where rituals take place.

“This country is not... I hate the term ‘indigenous peoples’, I hate that term. I hate it. The ‘Roma people’. There’s only one people in this country. Take it or leave it. The Brazilian people, that’s the only one. They may be black, they may be white, they may be Japanese, they may be of indigenous descent, but they have to be Brazilians, damn it! We need to end this business of peoples and privileges.”

Is the Minister for Education intolerant, xenophobic and racist? He is, and that is well known.

All the speeches at the ministers’ meetings, during a business-as-usual day in Brasília in the midst of a global pandemic, are absurd, revolting, criminal and inhuman. We are governed by fanatics and criminals, straight out of the vaults of 20 years of military dictatorship that deeply marked our history. Since the day the Bolsonaro government took office on January 1st, 2019, many explicit references have been made to the ideology of the Third Reich, to Goebbels’ speeches, or to Hitler’s National Socialist slogans. There is no subtlety – it’s coarse.

If you have managed to get to this point in the text, you might be wondering what this contextualization has to do with a reflection on the arts in the time of coronavirus. I apologize, but I find it impossible to think outside of this context. This information is necessary because, after talking with friends who don’t live in Brazil, I understand that the severity of the crisis and its unavoidable paradigm shift has already abated in other countries – through a temporary relaxation of the isolation measures, for example – even if a second wave may be on its way. For us in Brazil it is still impossible to see the end of the storm, the light at the end of the tunnel, or the port, even a temporary one, awaiting on the other side of the ocean. We are facing two viruses: the coronavirus and the far right. We are adrift in the middle of an immense ocean. As my friend, artist and performer Ítala Isis, precisely captured it:

“We are not on the same boat. We are the same sea.”

The feeling is one of impotence, of despair, because we know the worst is yet to come. A terrible shadow is lurking. The shadow of civil war, of institutional collapse and of the peak of the epidemic, which may arrive at any time. All of us know someone who has died, many of us have had Covid-19 ourselves, and we all have relatives who are sick. That is why this contextualization is necessary in order for you, the reader, to understand my situation of privilege so that you can think through the reflections which follow. They are reflections on the field of art – which may be, remembering Louise Bourgeois’

work, a “guaranty of sanity” (2000).

Since March 13th I have been in total isolation, at home, because of the Covid-19 pandemic. I live in a middle-class neighborhood, on the 17th floor of an apartment block that has eight apartments on each floor, and therefore around 500 people living in it. I am with my family at home: my daughter Flora, my granddaughter Sol, who was born on December 5th last year, my son-in-law André and Anádia, his mother. Two grandmothers, a couple and a baby, who we fondly refer to as the “baby from the end of the world”. Our isolation is radical; we don’t leave the house, not even to go to the supermarket. Using the elevator to go down 17 floors is a risky act. Our situation is privileged: I am a teacher on the Theater Direction Course and the Graduate Program in Scenic Arts at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, the largest public university in Brazil, and as a civil servant I have a job and, still, a salary.

The largest public hospital network in Brazil is that of the university hospitals. Brazil also has the SUS (Sistema Único de Saúde, or Universal Health System), which is a world reference in public health despite being brutally dismantled in recent years. Thanks to these institutions, the health system in Brazil has managed to delay the collapse seen in other countries as a result of the epidemic. Civil servants – scientists, epidemiologists, nurses, doctors, students and teachers – are showing us the way through this crisis. The intense mobilization and ongoing efforts of the SUS hospital and family clinic network, the universities and the research institutions are providing resources to help us face the pandemic. Still, Economy Minister Paulo Guedes, a notorious neoliberal with affiliations to the Chicago School, said the following words in the ministerial meeting mentioned earlier:

“Everyone believes that we are distracted, that they embraced us and that we got closer to them. But we just placed the hand grenade in the enemy’s pocket... two years without salary increases.”

I am an artist, an art researcher and a civil servant and, since all this started, I feel I have been summoned to war. My first thought in the face of the crisis was to understand what my position on this front is. Since the beginning of the pandemic, artists and culture workers all over the world have been the first to stop working. Interestingly, they have also been the first to mobilize themselves in digital contexts. Here in Brazil there are innumerable daily live transmissions from artists, activists and intellectuals promoting acts of solidarity, analyzing the situation, and offering contexts and artistic experiments.

The impact on the arts and culture sector in all countries is brutal, not only in the short term but in the medium and long term too. In Brazil there is no public policy or legislation to protect artists, such as the policies for ‘intermittents’ in France. Since the beginning of the current crisis, which began in 2013 and was followed by the coup against President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, the dismantling of the cultural sector has been strategic and extremely swift. There is no public support, open competitions or funding. The aim of this agenda is to criminalize artists, who are portrayed as lazy good-for-nothings. Curiously, it is books, films, television series, music, stage plays available online, live transmissions from artists and so on, that are providing mental health support so that those who can stay home actually do stay home. If the arts are saving us during this period of social isolation, who will save the artists?

Civil society movements have developed emergency campaigns to reduce the brutal social impact of the epidemic, which in Brazil means hunger. It is us supporting us. Community actions implemented by activists in the favelas, artists’ movements on the net, organization by grassroots social movements, and mobilization within universities are creating an unprecedented solidarity network. Besides corruption strategies and the media apparatus of hybrid war created by Cambridge Analytica, the election of Jair Bolsonaro showed us that the social base in Brazil has been hacked by the power grab of the neo-Pentecostal Evangelical churches, and by the militia. Progressives were left stunned by this defeat, and disconnected from their popular bases.

Therefore, I dare to say that if we may speak of a legacy for the world after the pandemic, it would reside in these social, artistic and cultural movements which are in the process of reorganizing themselves. This may be the chance to recreate a more conscious progressive base, with more capillarity and characterized by permanent solidarity. In this sense, art and culture, which are central to all facets of social life, have an important role in this reconstruction. The international paradigm shift that is both necessary and inevitable will not happen automatically or universally. The notion of universality, of a single humanity, is the problem, as the indigenous activist and intellectual Ailton Krenak has pointed out.⁵ If normality put us in the situation where we are now, then normality was the problem. That much we know. Please, stop

⁵ Read his book *Ideais para adiar o fim do mundo* (*Ideas to Delay the End of the World*). Read also *A queda do céu: palavras de um xamã yanomami* (*The Falling Sky: Words from a Yanomami Shaman*), by Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert.

talking about a ‘new normality’. It is not possible to return to ‘normality’, or any notion of ‘normality’, even though capitalism, that phoenix, that permanent co-option machine, hasn’t yet met its definitive ruin – if that is even possible.

So the question needs to be posed: how to mobilize our potential for life?

I am interested in looking at, knowing about, creating and working with and for those actions that articulate the potential of those other ways of living, those other economies. I always return to Walter Benjamin’s notion of the author as producer, which continues to actualize itself as an invitation to artists to take up a position within their scenes. We must implode the consensus about those techniques: the notion of the algorithmic social network, a capitalistic instrument of behavior control. Spiderwebs, fishing nets, weaving looms, birds’ nests... these are more welcoming images, more appropriate for our movements. They are solidarities that are recognized as separate from hegemonies, with more capillarity, mirrored along a huge, long, archaic, earthly net. Our ancestral production for the future. Acknowledging, learning and activating the potential of indigenous peoples’ technologies, of those excluded from the alleged single humanity, of those expelled from their own land in historical diasporas.

It is time to face the mirror of our violent coloniality, as Frantz Fanon said. The confrontation is for all of us, from the comfort of our homes and our families, our friends, our colleagues. The only artistic practice that is possible now is one that intensifies the discomfort and creates ruptures which transform, from the inside out, the disastrous heritage that brought us to this impasse. The arts can shake off their own modes of production and creation. Dreaming without answers, respecting dreams as free modes to access knowledge. Learning to learn and learn. We, artists, with our actions, our tools and our ways of creating, are trained to put pressure on paradigms. We are trained to work the senses in multiple ways in order to see the invisible, to say the unsayable, to play with silence, to suspend time, to create other ways of living, without endpoints, in continuous movement. We might help with the birth of this baby, which represents the potential for life. Artists as midwives? That is how I feel when I look at my granddaughter Sol every day, a baby born during one of the many ends of the world we have seen throughout our long history.

“And the question we must now ask is whether, in this slippery world which is committing suicide without noticing it, there can be found a nucleus of men capable of imposing this superior notion of the theater, men who will restore to all of us the natural and magic equivalent of the dogmas in which we no longer believe.”

Antonin Artaud⁶

P.S. When I was revising this text, on Tuesday May 26th, the Emergency Culture Law *Aldir Blanc* was approved in Parliament, allowing resources from the National Culture Fund to be immediately used to cover basic rent for artists and cultural workers, as well as support for cultural spaces during the crisis. We continue the campaign to get it approved by the Senate. @leiemergenciacultural #LeiEmergenciaCultural

P.P.S. These are some projects I have been involved in since the beginning of social isolation:

Muda Outras Economias:
www.muda-oe.com

Muda Picadeiro Digital:
www.mudapicadeirodigital.com.br

Núcleo Experimental de Performance – UFRJ – projeto Janelas Abertas:
www.youtube.com/c/NucleoExperimentaldePerformanceUFRJ

Fórum de Ciência e Cultura da UFRJ - projeto Navega UFRJ - arte e cultura em rede:
<https://forum.ufrj.br/index.php/destaques/1108-navega-ufrj-forum-lanca-programacao-digital/>

www.youtube.com/c/N%C3%BAcleoExperimentaldePerformanceUFRJ

Coro.naquarentena – Instagram
[@coro.naquarentena](https://www.instagram.com/coro.naquarentena)

www.instagram.com/coro.naquarentena/?hl=en

⁶ ARTAUD, Antonin: *The Theater and the Plague*, in *The Theater and Its Double*, translated from the French by Mary Caroline Richards, New York: Grove Press, 1958