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## THE MYTH OF RACIAL DEMOCRACY IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC

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*a person is not born white or black, but becomes from*

*the moment your body and mind are connected*

*to an entire network of collectively shared meanings,*

*whose existence precedes the formation of consciousness and*

*its effects (ALMEIDA, 2018, p. 53).*

**Abstract:** This article sought to promote some contributions to the reflection on the myth of racial democracy based on the pandemic caused by the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). Considering the conceptions regarding contemporary definitions of terms such as “racism”, “black” and “race”, formulated within prejudiced contexts throughout history, elements were presented to assist in understanding this mythological dimension about racial equality, which results in extreme vulnerability of the black population in the fight against coronavirus.

**Keywords:** Coronavirus, COVID-19, Racism, Democracy, Violence.

## INTRODUCTON

This article aims to provoke some reflections on a silenced and invisible topic, especially in Brazil: the myth of racial democracy. To contextualize it historically, the arguments presented here are based on a brief analysis of the concepts of “black” and “race” to better understand the pandemic context and its repercussions regarding the black population.

Given the current scenario, endowed with absolute exceptionality, imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic — a term used by the World Health Organization (WHO) to name the disease caused by the New Coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2 —, it was declared through Ordinance no. ° 188 of February 3,

2020, Public Health Emergency of National Importance (ESPIN). A few days later, Law No. 13,979, dated 2/6/2020, was published, which provides for measures to address the public health emergency of international importance arising from the Coronavirus responsible for the outbreak at the end of 2019 and, after Ordinance No. 356, of 11.3.2020, which regulates the previous document. This Ordinance mainly lists measures that imply the individual and social protection of Brazilian citizens based on the principle of equality, that is, it is based on the principle that the law is equal for everyone, taking into account its democratic dimension. Hence comes the first legal-legal argument on which the first mythical conception rests, which begins the unveiling of social differences instead of promoting their opposite.

The other legal provisions regarding COVID-19 are based on this same premise and become more sophisticated in detailing related issues beyond health: education, economy, work, social security, criminal system...

Myths depend on time and space to exist; and to be understood, they depend on a story constructed in a certain context. There are many stories, in different times and at the same time. There is, therefore, a paradox of time that is constituted and reconstituted simultaneously in the different perspectives presented by the different accounts of different authors. The myths about racial democracy also correspond to a story that has been told, but which continues to be told in the same way despite different times.

## RACIAL DEMOCRACY AND STRUCTURAL RACISM

The theses that support “racial democracy” become important for rethinking racial relations, as well as law in Brazil and in history as a whole. The concept of race in modernity appears as a central concept to substantiate the reason and deaths of slavery as constitutive of contemporary society.

According to 19th century positivism, criminological thought served as an argument justifying human diversity. The idea is that biological characteristics, based on biological determinism, as well as geographic determinism, would explain the moral, psychological and intellectual differences between different races.

It is possible to affirm that “racism remained and found support in theories that proclaimed the racial inferiority of black people in relation to white people and that saw in mulattos the characterization of a sick nation, racially and socially”. (Telles, 2003).<sup>1</sup>

In this sense, the black condition would justify the immorality, lack of intelligence and tendency to violence sustained in the works of Cesare Lombroso, Enrico Ferri and, in Brazil, Silvio Romero and Raimundo Nina Rodrigues.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the biological condition of race, the phenomenon of racism highlights the state of prejudice as a silent or manifest action and despite arguments about modern racism, in the 20th century after the Second World War, it assumes a political state that extends from the individual to institutions.

Considering that “institutions are hegemonized by certain racial groups that use institutional mechanisms to impose

their political and economic interests”,<sup>3</sup> the institutional power of dominant groups determines the position of black people in the space of the institution.

Racial discrimination, therefore, can be considered the result of the intersection between three categories of racism: individual, institutional and structural.

According to Tomé,<sup>4</sup> structural racism is related to the debate about whether racism is just a social construction or not.

*It is not that, it is not just a social construction, racism is structural. The values of modernity fostered the existence of racism. From the point of view of biology, there was an argument that there were superiors and inferiors. There is also this view that there are developed and underdeveloped countries. All these concepts of modernity, which we perceive as normal, mean that the structure of society itself contains the bases of racism. Racism is not a superficial, image issue. It is present in institutions, in people's beliefs, in the form of behavior. That's why many people are surprised when they are called racist, because the naturalization and acceptance of certain practices is such that no one perceives themselves as racist.*

In this sense, the naturalization of racism can be conceived as a process of constitution of subjectivities,<sup>5</sup> which creates a set of principles based on a certain rationality to justify racial inequalities and which also aim to legitimize representations of reality in an ideologized way.

According to Almeida (2018), in the Brazilian case, since the implementation of the first republic, projects have been organized to institutionalize racism, making it part of the national imagination: “In other words, Brazil is a typical example of how racism it becomes a

1. TELLES, E. E. *Racismo à brasileira: uma nova perspectiva sociológica*. Rio de Janeiro: Relume-Dumará, 2003. p.24.

2. ALMEIDA, Silvio Luiz de. *Racismo Estrutural*. São Paulo: Sueli Carneiro; Pólen, 2018.

3. ALMEIDA, Silvio Luiz de. *Racismo Estrutural*. São Paulo: Sueli Carneiro; Pólen, 2018.

4. MATA, Edileny Tomé. *Entrevista: Edileny Tomé da Mata fala sobre a Teoria Crítica Racial*. TRT da 4ª Região (RS), 15 out. 2018. Disponível em: <https://www.trt4.jus.br/portais/trt4/modulos/noticias/195353>. Acesso em: 30 jun. 2020.

5. ALMEIDA, Silvio. *Racismo Estrutural*. São Paulo: Sueli Carneiro; Pólen, 2018.

technology of power and a way of internalizing contradictions”, including disseminating the ideology of scientific racism in the context of the Old Republic.

The author maintains that, in 1930, the need for national unification and the formation of an internal market, due to the industrialization process, gave rise to an entire institutional dynamic for the production of the discourse of racial democracy”. In this sense, he also highlights that “racial inequality is transformed into cultural diversity and, therefore, becomes part of the national landscape”<sup>6</sup>.

## STATE AND RACIAL DEMOCRACY

According to Foucault, racism and race are concepts defined by the State and justify the practices of violence based on the legal system created by and for it. According to the author, biological discourse is still infiltrated in the social body and favors the creation and maintenance of institutions that feedback the “discourse of race struggle as a principle of elimination, segregation and, finally, normalization of society”<sup>7</sup>. In other words, the lives of some are maintained by the deliberate elimination of others.

Based on the hypothesis of genocidal colonization practiced by the State, Foucault presents State racism as a biopolitical strategy:

*Racism is formed in this context (racism in its modern, state, biologizing form): an entire policy of population, family, marriage, education, social hierarchization and property, and a long series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, health and daily life then received their color and justification from the mythical concern for protecting the purity of blood and making*

*the race triumph.*<sup>8</sup>

According to Foucault, the relationship between state power and racism is extremely close in Modernity. Through race, the State assumes control and guarantees the exercise of power, using as its argument the purification of the social body: “Racism is linked to the functioning of a State forced to use race, the elimination of races and the purification of race, to exercise its sovereign power.”<sup>9</sup>

This biopower concentrated in race appears specialized in producing healthy and productive bodies and justifies the homicidal function of the State, maintaining the legitimacy to injure and kill bodies.

Based on this understanding, the State adopts a new outfit to continue justifying racism. According to the author, the murderous function of the State cannot be ensured except through racism.

Given this perspective, the imaginary construction formulated by European societies about the meanings of race and black promote the figure of the State’s main enemy:

*Black people and race mean the same thing in the imagination of European societies. (...) its appearance in modern knowledge and discourse about man (and, consequently, about humanism and Humanity) was, if not simultaneous, at least parallel; and, since the beginning of the 18th century, it constitutes, as a whole, the underground (unconfessed and often denied), or rather, the complex nucleus from which the modern project of knowledge - but also of governance - spread.<sup>10</sup> (p. 10)*

In this sense, Mbembe argues that if the main objective of law and bureaucracy is the coercion and control of bodies, and fear is the main instrument of the State, it is on black people that this fear will be projected, and therefore on their body that State control will

6. ALMEIDA, Silvio. *Racismo Estrutural*. São Paulo: Sueli Carneiro; Pólen, 2018.

7. FOUCAULT, Michel. *Defender la sociedad*. Tradução Horário Pons. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2010. p. 51.

8. FOUCAULT, Michel. *Defender la sociedad*. Tradução Horário Pons. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2010. p. 142.

9. FOUCAULT, Michel. *Defender la sociedad*. Tradução Horário Pons. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2010. p. 233.

10. MBEMBE, Achille. *Crítica da razão negra*. Tradução Marta Lança. 1. ed. Lisboa: Antígona, 2014. p. 10.

be exercised.

It is also worth noting that for the author, the emergence of modern law in Europe understands everything that is beyond it as at the same time beyond and below the law. The modern State and liberalism then emerge as biopolitical instruments that will allow and justify the enslavement of black people — understood as a threat, as a set of fables and nonsense that in turn trigger affections —, the establishment of the plantation system and, with this, a global market.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the modern State emerges as an instrument of the market and a product of mercantilist reason, from which not only a division of the world is established, but a division in which race occupies a central role:

*In the essay La Naissance de la biopolitique, Foucault argues that, in origin, liberalism “intrinsically implies a relationship of production/destruction [with] freedom”. It forgets to explain that, historically, Black slavery represents the culmination of this destruction of freedom. According to Foucault, the paradox of liberalism is that “it is necessary, on the one hand, to produce freedom, but this very gesture implies that, on the other hand, limitations, controls, coercions, obligations supported by threats, etc. are established.” The production of freedom, therefore, has a cost whose calculation principle is, Foucault adds, security and protection. In other words, the economy of power characteristic of liberalism and democracy of the same type is based on the tight game of freedom, security and protection against the omnipresence of threat, risk and danger. (...) The black slave represents this danger.<sup>12</sup>*

This way, a universalizing discourse is founded that mixes the categories “black” and “race”, mainly harmful to the conceptions of law and legal effects in relation to the topic. Therefore, Mbembe then suggests the need to reaffirm these categories in view of the supposed impossibility of reconciliation

between the “white race”, bearer of full humanity and citizenship, and the “black race” and goes further:

*Law is, therefore, in this case, a way of legally establishing a certain idea of Humanity while it is divided between a race of conquerors and a race of servants. Only the race of conquerors is legitimate to have human quality. The quality of the human being cannot be given as a whole to everyone and, even if it were, it would not abolish differences. This way, the differentiation between the land of Europe and the colonial land is the logical consequence of another distinction between European people and savages. Until the 19th century, despite colonial occupation, colonial territory was not identified with 41 Ibid., p. 199. 111 the European territory of the occupying state. They will always be distinct, whether they are plantation, extraction or settlement colonies. It was only towards the end of the 19th century that attempts were made to integrate colonial territories into the government and administration systems of the colonizing states.*

## PANDEMIC RACISM

According to Campos, “after the Second World War, structuralist, institutional or systemic concepts of racism emerge when everyday racist practices become intangible”. The author argues that a broad condemnation of racist ideologies and practices coexists with the reproduction of economic, political and cultural inequalities between different racialized groups.

Assuming that the concept of racialization can be legitimized by subjectivities permeated by interculturality, an important debate about differences in identities and cultures needs to be considered in its relationship with racial democracy.

Faced with the recognition that attempted identities do not seem to take into account diversity in the face of constitutive

11. MBEMBE, Achille. *Crítica da razão negra*. Tradução Marta Lança. 1. ed. Lisboa: Antígona, 2014. p. 141.

12. MBEMBE, Achille. *Crítica da razão negra*. Tradução de Marta Lança. 1. ed. Lisboa: Antígona, 2014. p. 141.

characteristics of the same subject, Butler (2015), when dealing with contemporary wars, “focusing on cultural ways of regulating affective and ethical dispositions through of a selective and differentiated framing of violence”,<sup>13</sup> denounces the methodology of this framing based on frames that make it impossible to see the lives of others as inapprehensible. There are more variables involved in the debate about who this other is, such as social belonging, for example. Racialization does not seem to solve this and, in a pandemic state, this type of violence intensifies. There is no belonging, only exclusion.

Considering inequalities, the New Coronavirus pandemic becomes a major challenge, as in Brazil racism is a structuring system with prejudices that underlie inequalities based on race or ethnicity. Therefore, black people will suffer the impacts of the pandemic more severely.

In the case of the black population, the pandemic scenario is related to unequal conditions determined by structural and institutional racism, as they have less access to health services and are in greater proportion among vulnerable populations, who have experienced the absence of the State in their lives for centuries. territories. The pandemic reveals how Brazil is an unequal country and has made little progress in overcoming racism.<sup>14</sup>

In spaces territorially inhabited by the majority of the black population, for example, there is a state of precariousness that favors the expansion of the new Coronavirus.

It is also worth noting that the fight against racism presents itself as a necessary agenda for

the demands of society and is not restricted to the current problems of the COVID-19 pandemic. Health professionals warn of the serious consequences:

*Firstly, we need the social protection policies implemented in the face of the Covid-19 emergency to guarantee equity, also reaching quilombola communities, favelas and suburban populations who, in order to receive emergency aid from the government, need to expose themselves to infection in the agglomeration of hours of queues at banks and lottery outlets, we need to ensure that access to Covid-19 diagnosis, whether through the rapid test or the immunological reaction test, is distributed equitably among the population and that the testing initiatives called ‘in mass’ have sufficient capillarity to cover rich and impoverished areas of cities with the same effectiveness.<sup>15</sup>*

Considering the social and economic differences that worsen in the case of the black population, health professionals continue their complaint:

*Finally, we must demand greater transparency from the bodies responsible for pandemic data in the country so that they: include race or ethnicity markers in data relating to the entire course of the disease, from testing, hospitalizations and possible deaths; maintain a systematized and agile routine for disseminating this data to society and expand the testing capacity in the country and do so in a differentiated way in areas of greater vulnerability, such as people deprived of liberty, populations that live and survive on the streets and quilombola communities.<sup>16</sup>*

Undoubtedly, data about this disease must be disclosed in favor of transparency and the population’s right to information. In the spaces territorially inhabited by the majority of the

13. BUTLER, Judith. *Quadros de Guerra: quando a vida é passível de luto?* Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2015. p. 14.

14. GOES, E.F, RAMOS, D.O & FERREIRA, A.J.F. Desigualdades raciais em saúde e a pandemia da Covid-19. *Trab. educ. saúde*, v.18, n. 3, 29 maio 2020. Disponível em: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1981-7746-sol00278>. Acesso em: 1 jul. 2020.

15. GOES, E.F, RAMOS, D.O & FERREIRA, A.J.F. Desigualdades raciais em saúde e a pandemia da Covid-19. *Trab. educ. saúde*, v.18, n. 3, 29 maio 2020. Disponível em: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1981-7746-sol00278>. Acesso em: 1 jul. 2020.

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black population, a state of precariousness is evident that favors the expansion of the new Coronavirus.

## CONCLUSION

This article sought to promote some contributions about the myth of racial democracy based on the pandemic caused by COVID-19. Without forgetting the conceptions about black people and race formulated in a prejudiced way in history, elements were presented to help understand this mythological dimension of racial equality.

Considering inequalities, the New

Coronavirus pandemic becomes a major challenge, as in Brazil racism is a structuring system with prejudices that underlie inequalities based on race or ethnicity. Consequently, black people will suffer the impacts of the pandemic more severely.

In view of this, since the black population represents more than half of the Brazilian population, specific measures to address the inequalities inherent to racism become essential to control the expansion of the pandemic in the country, as well as to prevent new forms of violence.

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