

HIGHER PUBLIC EDUCATION IN BRAZIL DURING THE PANDEMIC: the trial balloon of emergency remote teaching

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SUMMARY: For more than thirty years, higher public education in Brazil has intensely lived through the pressures of capital's designs for education, according to indications of international organizations. Nevertheless, with the arrival of the pandemic of the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), proposals have accelerated, and emergency remote teaching (ERT) has been used as a "trial balloon" period³ for the imposition and expansion of

privatized and accelerated education. ERT has relied on international guidelines, but has also made use of the rise of the extreme right in the Brazilian government and the adherence of part of the international community to a plan which imposes underfunding of education, authoritarianism and the intervention of technology in the processes of teaching-learning to repurpose Brazilian public university.

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3. "Trial balloon": expression to denominate an attempt to test the public credibility of a measure or policy. (Editor's note in original.).

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In Brazil, the period of the pandemic, imposed by the new coronavirus variant (SARS-CoV-2), brought about the death of 665 thousand people and infected more than 30 million, misfortunes whose principal factors include the delay on the part of the federal government of President Jair Bolsonaro (elected in 2019) to initiate actions to combat and prevent the pandemic. This delay has been justified by the antiscientific and denialist perspective rooted in the rise of the far right, with fascist aspects, in Brazil. This perspective is not limited to the pandemic, but extends through all the actions of the current government, and has also guided the country's educational policy during this period.

In higher public education in Brazil, religious fundamentalism, an anti-scientific outlook, and the militarization of life are allied symbiotically, and linked to neoliberal policy, now with its ultraneoliberal face. All these have grave repercussions in education.

International organizations such as the World Bank (WB), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), advocate in their documents an education in Latin America in conformity with a commercial education, at the service of capitalist development and the demands of the reconfiguration of the world of job restructuring, at the expense of the worker. As if these decisions were not enough, many of them, implemented by successive governments in present-day Brazil, come together with conservatism, made explicit in the period of the pandemic, in the normalization of an education mediated by technology.

In the overlap of these aspects of the Brazilian scene, the pandemic and the ERT established themselves in the context of a deep underfunding of higher public education. The magnitude of this lack is shown by the fact that in 2021 the budget of the Federal Universities of Education was the lowest of the last 13 years. In 2021,

the budgetary reduction was combined with the ERT, leaving the financial responsibility of setting up remote work to teachers and administrative technicians, and leaving to students (with few programs to help students of limited means) the responsibility of arranging their own study conditions. In 2022, with the return of in-person learning, the reality of a meager budget makes clear that maintaining the university on a quality level has become inviable.

Based on information made available by the Federal Chamber of Deputies (BRAZIL, 2021) through the program Brazil Budget, with a value updated for the inflation of the period for prices of January of 2022, what one immediately observes in the total budget of federal universities (now numbering only 69⁴ in Brazil), is the explicit stagnation provoked by the CE-95⁵, preventing any policy of expansion of access to public and free higher education.

From 2020 to 2021, the reduction of the overall budget of the federal universities was 34%, reducing staffing expenses by 32%, operating expenses by 45%, and investment expenses by 84%. If in 2020, in the first year of the pandemic, the average of financing per institution was R\$97 million (19 million 449 thousand U.S. dollars), in 2021 that value dropped to R\$ 53 million (10 million 626 thousand U.S. dollars), a cut that verged on 50%, which does not make the existence of higher public education in Brazil inviable, but makes it impossible to maintain the standards of quality inherent in federal universities.

The pandemic ended up accelerating elements marked out initially by the policies of international organizations, such as the expansion of distance education; in-person pre- and post-graduate courses; a

4. In addition to federal public institutions, in Brazil there are public institutions on the state and municipal level, making a total of 302. According to the Brazilian Educational Census of 2019, there were 302 public institutions and 2306 private institutions. (Author's note.)

5. Constitutional Amendment approved in 2018 under Michel Temer (2016-2018), who established a limit on spending in public and social policies, including education.

push toward public-private associations; incentives to sell services to the market; and also the resurgence of authoritarian and conservative aspects which permeated the implantation of the ERT in educational institutions. Accordingly, for Brazilian reality, in addition to the plan of commercialization of education, the reduction of public resources and the disruption of educational institutions from within, the moment of the pandemic also made possible actions that were less democratic, if not openly authoritarian, on the part of managers. Some were even appointed deans or given other posts within the academic community, including those relating to electoral proceedings.

In the same vein, the academic community was left aside in the majority of proceedings of implementation of the ERT. The democratic and participatory requests of educational institutions added little to these deliberations, the budget was restricted to the management of institutions; dialogue-oriented pedagogic practices were neglected, which led to a normalization of education mediated by technologies without time or conditions for teachers and students to adapt to the new conditions. Thus, the form was worn out as an essence of the processes of teaching and learning, necessarily dialogue-oriented, collective and in-person. Remote meetings and the draining of democratic requests of the universities, such as superior and collegiate advice, become natural.

Thus, between the wage seizure provoked by the need of teachers to structure their homes to carry out remote work without having the needed economic support, the lack of support for students, especially those of greater socioeconomic vulnerability, reduction of investments in public education, and emptying education of its in-person and dialogue-based quality, resulted in a new educational level being achieved in Brazil, more precarious and fluid.

Especially in countries with dependent capitalism, such as Brazil, with a history of slavery and patriarchy, the effects of the international structural crisis are overwhelming. The symbiosis between the various dimensions of the crisis are allied to the cycles of the particular situation in Brazil, with repercussions for

education and other public policies conquered by the working class. An expression of this regression is the Reuni Digital project, introduced by the federal government during the pandemic, which envisaged the setting up of a university which would be 100% digital, in which the figure of the teacher is replaced by that of the tutor, and the teaching-research-outreach tripod, provided for in the Brazilian constitution of 1988 for Brazilian education, is emptied.

The analysis of the “opportunity” which this situation brings was completely co-opted by the national sectors of the bourgeoisie and its government representatives. The economic investments of the designs of capital in the joining of the public services, and especially in higher education, are combined with investments in the fields of culture and values. Higher public education, in addition to being impacted by counter-reforms which upset careers, suffers a reduction of salaries and funds, together with conservative plans which seek to despoil education and its critical and dialogue-oriented form. The joining of these elements constitutes a symbiosis of economic and cultural guidelines which reinforce a subordinating and alienating perspective which seeks the control and submission of large segments of the working class.

The alternative to the “trial balloon” which the period of the pandemic became, with major absorption of the designs of capital and the emptying of public education, must open the way on a continental scale, rallying Latin American countries around a project of higher public education, of quality, socially referenced, anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-LGBT-phobic—an education which is genuinely for everyone. This is the central task of all those who defend an educational project which has human emancipation on the horizon.

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