

Neoliberalism and the Superego: A reading on the management of contemporary discontent

Neoliberalismo e supereu: Uma leitura sobre a gestão do mal-estar contemporâneo

Neoliberalismo y superyó: Una lectura sobre la gestión del malestar contemporáneo

Néolibéralisme et surmoi : Une lecture sur la gestion du malaise contemporain

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Abstract

Understanding the tangled relationships between neoliberalism and human subjectivity constitutes the main scope of this study. Furthermore, based on this, we also seek to systematically grasp the associative textures of the Super-Me's status with the logic of neoliberal functioning to establish links with the psychic phenomenon of authority and authoritarianism. This research was, fundamentally, based on a psychoanalytic research method perspective, whose parameter is based on the premise of the interpretative analysis of subjective and social phenomena. Thus, it is possible to think that in contemporary times, there are modes of subjectivation that are emptied by what, in the past, was regulated by the paternal function, by the Name-of-the-Father. This fact corroborates the implementation of a social functioning outlined by the so-called imperative of enjoyment, which translates into the assiduous demand for happiness, which has been called, by some authors, exacerbated hedonism. There is, however, a reminder that is a product of this community manifestation: helplessness. Similarly, there is a paradigmatic proposition that establishes a structural defence mode that reflects the specificity of the contemporary period, called the denial of deprivation. This concept erects the conception of the non-introjected image of the paternal function, which encompasses its statutory fall; this results in a psychic constitution based on the rigorous radicality of the Super-Me through its imperious deliberation: it enjoys! Finally, contemporaneity is engendered, from a point of view, as a hiatus marked by the denial of the founding Law. And about this, from the fall of the status of otherness, neoliberalism constitutes itself as a manager of the policies of subjective suffering in the contemporary world of human malaise. Thus, the articulation between the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary can be thought of differently than what had been expressed in previous periods.

Keywords: contemporary subject, politics, superego, authoritarianism, helplessness

Resumo

Compreender as emaranhadas relações entre o neoliberalismo e a subjetividade humana se constitui o principal escopo deste estudo. Outrossim, a partir disso, busca-se, também, apreender sistematicamente as tessituras associativas do estatuto do Supereu com a lógica de funcionamento neoliberal, de modo a estabelecer nexos de ligação junto ao fenômeno psíquico da autoridade e do autoritarismo. Esta

pesquisa parte de uma perspectiva baseada, fundamentalmente, no método de investigação psicanalítico, cujo parâmetro se sustenta na premissa da análise interpretativa de fenômenos subjetivos e sociais. Assim, é possível pensar que no contemporâneo há modos de subjetivação que se encontram esvaziados pelo que, outrora, era regulada pela função paterna, pelo Nome-do-Pai. Esse fato corrobora a efetivação de um funcionamento social traçado pelo chamado imperativo de gozo, que se traduz na assídua demanda por felicidade, o que foi denominado, por alguns autores, por hedonismo exacerbado. Há, no entanto, um resto que é produto dessa manifestação comunitária: o desamparo. Similarmente, há uma proposição paradigmática que estabelece um modo de defesa estrutural que traduz a especificidade do período contemporâneo, chamado de desmentido da privação. Esse conceito erige a concepção da imagem não-introjetada da função paterna, o que engloba a sua queda estatutária; resulta, assim, uma constituição psíquica fundada na radicalidade rigorosa do Supereu, por meio da sua imperiosa deliberação: goza! Por fim, a contemporaneidade é engendrada, de um ponto de vista, como um hiato marcado pela negação do regimento da Lei fundante. Sobre isso, a partir da queda do estatuto da alteridade, o neoliberalismo se constitui como gerenciador das políticas do sofrimento subjetivo do mundo contemporâneo, do mal-estar humano. Assim, a articulação entre o Real, o Simbólico e o Imaginário pode ser pensada de maneiras distintas do que havia sido expresso em períodos anteriores.

Palavras-chave: *sujeito contemporâneo, política, supereu, autoritarismo, desamparo*

Resumen

Comprender las enmarañadas relaciones entre el neoliberalismo y la subjetividad humana se constituye el principal escopo de este estudio. Además, a partir de esto, se busca, también, aprehender sistemáticamente las tesituras asociativas del estatuto del Superyó con la lógica de funcionamiento neoliberal, de modo que se establezcan nexos de ligación junto al fenómeno psíquico de la autoridad y del autoritarismo. Esta investigación se basa, fundamentalmente, en una perspectiva del método de investigación psicoanalítico, cuyo parámetro se sostiene en la premisa del análisis interpretativo de fenómenos subjetivos y sociales. Así, es posible pensar que en el contemporáneo hay modos de subjetivación que se encuentran vaciados por lo que, antes, era regulada por la función paterna, por el Nombre-del-Padre. Este hecho corrobora la efectivización de un funcionamiento social trazado por el llamado imperativo de gozo, que se traduce en la asidua demanda por felicidad, lo que fue denominado, por algunos autores, por hedonismo exacerbado. Sin embargo, hay un restante que es producto de esta manifestación comunitaria: el desamparo. Similarmente, hay una proposición paradigmática que establece un modo de defensa estructural que traduce la especificidad del período contemporáneo, llamado de desmentido de la privación. Este concepto erige la concepción de la imagen no-introyectada de la función paterna, lo que engloba su caída estatutaria; resulta, así, una constitución psíquica fundada en la radicalidad rigurosa del Superyó, por medio de su imperiosa deliberación: ¡goza! Por fin, la contemporaneidad es generada, ante un punto de vista, como un hiato marcado por la negación del regimiento de la Ley fundante. Y acerca de esto, a partir de la caída del estatuto de la alteridad, el neoliberalismo se constituye como gestor de las políticas del sufrimiento subjetivo del mundo contemporáneo, del malestar humano. Así, la articulación entre lo Real, el Simbólico y el Imaginario, puede ser pensada de maneras distintas de lo que había sido expreso en periodos anteriores.

Palabras clave: *sujeto contemporáneo, política, superyó, autoritarismo, desamparo*

Résumé

Comprendre les relations enchevêtrées entre le néolibéralisme et la subjectivité humaine est le principal objectif de cette étude. De plus, à partir de là, on cherche également à appréhender systématiquement les tessitures associatives du statut du surmoi avec la logique du fonctionnement néolibéral, afin d'établir des liens avec le phénomène psychique de l'autorité et de l'autoritarisme. Cette recherche a été proposée dans une perspective basée, fondamentalement, sur la méthode d'investigation psychanalytique, dont le paramètre se constitue sur la prémisses de l'analyse interprétative des phénomènes subjectifs et sociaux. Ainsi, il est possible de penser que dans le contemporain il y a des modes de subjectivation qui sont vidés par ce qui était autrefois régulé par la fonction paternelle, par le nom-du-père. Ce fait corrobore l'efficacité d'un fonctionnement social tracé par le soi-disant impératif de jouissance, qui se traduit par la demande assidue de bonheur, qui a été appelée, par certains auteurs, par un hédonisme exacerbé. Il y a cependant un repos qui est le produit de cette manifestation communautaire : l'impuissance. De même, il existe une proposition paradigmatique qui établit un mode de défense structurelle qui traduit la spécificité de la période contemporaine, appelée déni de privation. Ce concept établit l'idée de l'image non introjetée de la fonction paternelle, incluant sa chute statutaire ; cela résulte ainsi à une Constitution psychique fondée sur la rigueur radicale du surmoi, à travers son impératif délibérant : jouissez ! Enfin, la contemporanéité est souvent perçue, d'un point de vue, comme un hiatus marqué par la négation du règlement de la loi fondatrice. Et sur ce, dès la chute du statut d'altérité, le néolibéralisme se constitue en gestionnaire des politiques de la souffrance subjective du monde contemporain, du malaise humain. Ainsi, l'articulation entre le Réel, le symbolique et l'imaginaire, peut être pensée de manière différente de ce qui avait été exprimé dans les périodes précédentes.

Mots-clés : *sujet contemporain, politique, surmoi, autoritarisme, abandon*

Some fundamental aspects for understanding contemporaneity

According to Han (2015), contemporary times are marked by an excess of positivity; by the replacement of otherness by indifference, by the lack of strangeness. In this sense, strangeness is annihilated in a paradigm of consumption. To say that otherness has been replaced, that is, has disappeared, means that the current era is devoid of negativity. Han (2015) calls the process of denial of the other by an I the dialectic of negativity, that is, it is from the non-recognition of the other that the subject will assert himself, self-affirm. Negativity, from this perspective, implies the fact that human existence is, in itself, underlined by the difference between people. Birman (2017), in turn, suggests that the path that establishes the social bond goes beyond the scope of the recognition that there is a distinction between the subjects of a society. From another angle, the positivization of the world, as proposed by Han (2015), gives rise to new forms of violence: violence inherent to the system itself – the neoliberal system.

According to Lebrun (2008), nowadays the modes of social regulation do not work as they did before: the norm, that is, the understanding and acceptance of the Law, the ideal that is shared collectively and the hierarchy transmitted by tradition are severely questioned. For the author, there is a crisis of legitimacy, a crisis of references.

For Dardot and Laval (2016), we live, notably, in a period marked by the progress of something that was born a certain time ago and that is a possible illustration of the living being, a drawing, an image, a human profile, therefore, an anthropological invention. *Homo economicus*, as named by Foucault (2008), appeared from a huge variety of writings and thoughts of the sixteenth century, whose objective was, evidently, the attempt to replace the classic effigy of the Christian person, virtuous and chaste, with a new being, moral and immoral, at the same time that, through calculation, maintains relations with others and, above all, could be directed, educated and governed by his interest. Here, behold, the root, in germ, of today's world.

The West is predominantly governed by the neoliberal mode of economic and social regulation. This, in turn, is based on a normative logic driven by policies, not only by the expansion of markets. In this way, according to Dardot and Laval (2016), the State is reduced to the position of a mere “guarantor” that the market logic fully functions in all instances of the lives of individuals, since there is no separation between the economy and the rest of social and political activities. For Dunker (2015), the economy acts, in this sense, with the intention of inflicting pain on the person, so that the State is in a “suspended” position, which means that the most degrading living conditions can, in fact, be consummated.

In short, neoliberal thinking is marked by a capitalist rationality that goes beyond the economic framework and produces a political-cultural logic that takes its operating mode from capitalism and applies it to other spheres. It is therefore stated that all social and human relations are governed by the norms of competition, a basic premise of capital performance; competitiveness, *per se*, becomes a principle, a foundation, in all areas, without exception (Dardot & Laval, 2016).

In the face of the norm of competition, of this *market imperative*, what is strictly imposed is the business management model. This model applies to all people in neoliberal society; individuals become “entrepreneurs of themselves”, they formally operate as capital to be managed and the task, in view of this, is to accumulate value, that is, self-valuation: subjects must value themselves as capital (Dardot & Laval, 2016).

Neoliberalism, therefore, is a specific rationality, singular, which associates particular aspects: the fact of being led by the State – but which presupposes a transformation of the latter – associated with liberal policies that, in order to transform society, are obliged to transform the public apparatus itself; in all public institutions, the norms are applied to make the State a device that has as its form and function the generalization of a certain type of business functioning: competition.

Thus, “new public management” emerges, which basically consists of importing rules from the private sector into the public sector, which causes institutions to function in a different way than that established by liberal-democratic policies. It is no longer the instance of solidarity and social cohesion that prevails, nor is it just the social order. The state regime becomes an active agent of transformation of society and individuals, whose functioning must obey the rules of the particularities of the private sector. Governments tend to make individuals themselves adopt a capitalist subjectivity, which has as one of its foundations the idea of meritocracy and equality of conditions.

This conception is articulated with the proposition articulated by Safatle et al. (2020), with regard to the idea of the existence of a true model of social engineering that is sustained by the assumption of the interference of economic structures in social organization, based on the assumption of certain moral and psychological attributes for the field of economics. The “moral economy”, a term used by the authors, reflects the violent elimination of political issues from the deliberative functioning of the social body, in a kind of erasure of the possibility of executing arguments between opposites, which inevitably produces psychosocial consequences for all subjects (Safatle et al., 2020).

Given this scenario, Dardot and Laval (2016) point out a particularly interesting property for understanding contemporary governments: neoliberalism causes the destruction of the democratic imaginary, which the authors call “dedemocratization”. This is what was argued by Safatle et al. (2020) regarding the so-called provisional dictatorship thesis as a way of implementing the neoliberal model of political consecration. In other words, according to the authors, some economists assumed the idea that, for the implementation of neoliberal principles, the installation of authoritarian and antidemocratic governments

would be essential, in an evident imposition of the bases of the political and economic model of neoliberalism. This can be seen expressed in the countless headlines of many newspapers – among them: *Le Monde* (Meyerfeld, 2019), *Nexo Jornal* (Cruz, 2020; Henrique, 2020a), *BBC Brasil* (Carmo, 2020) – about the current Brazilian Federal Government. Many nations today, for example Hungary, Brazil and even the United States, to some extent, are merely formal democracies, as there is strong distrust between the governed and the governors regarding the stability of democratic systems (Henrique, 2020b).

Neoliberal states and their psychosocial maintenance devices

In this sense, neoliberalism creates a new subject: a subject whose subjectivity is based on the construction and maintenance of guilt devices. Suffering is indispensable to the neoliberal subject (Dardot & Laval, 2016). The neoliberal subject, therefore, although engaged in consumption and the meritocracy that legitimizes his place as a consumer, reifies the subject of helplessness, classically Freudian, since “in order to create subjects, it is necessary to initially become helpless. For it is necessary to move outside of what promises us support, to move outside of the order that individualizes us, that predicates us within the current situation” (Safatle, 2016, p. 40).

Added to neoliberalism is necropolitics, a concept developed by Mbembe (2018), in which, in summary, the State, based on its sovereign power, begins to dictate the course of the lives of individuals at their maximum point, that is, it is the State, with its monopoly over death, that will say, in an institutionalized manner, who has the right to live and who has the duty to die. During the COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the Sars-CoV-2 virus, this concept became even more evident. In the case of Brazil, the Federal Government assumed the position of engaging in an open conflict with health authorities regarding whether or not to implement social distancing, mandatory use of masks, purchase of vaccines, among others (Bertoni, 2020). A notable example was when, in March 2020 – when the risks posed by the virus were still unknown – the Minister of Economy began to advise citizens to carry out the so-called “vertical isolation”, in which only the elderly would remain at home, while young people would continue to “move the wheel of the economy” (Bertoni et al., 2021), in an evident political perspective of annihilating the most vulnerable. It is important to consider that, from a neoliberal perspective, when adopting the concept of Dardot and Laval (2016), the closure of businesses, a consequence of the distancing policy, is seen as unacceptable.

Finally, Mbembe (2018) explains that necropolitics emerges from a possible dynamic of biopolitics, however, in an opposite way. As investigated by Foucault (2008), biopolitics is a concept that denotes, in a very summarized way, the notion of control over the bodies of subjects, from the engendering of an authoritarian political and economic power, with the objective of establishing arbitrariness over life, monitoring and punishing manifestations that go against the premises constructed to guarantee and maintain the *status quo*. It is worth noting, in time, that this Foucauldian perspective assumes the network of influence of this power as something capillary, rhizomatic, among the members of the *corpus sociale*. Thus, capitalism, in the division of classes, is based on the power of coercion that is materialized in practices sustained in the absolute domination of all dimensions of human existence, by those who hold power. On the other hand, the logic of necropolitics partially subverts this model, with the advent of the principle of “letting die,” through the denial of basic health care, the incompetence of the authorities, the neglect of public policies provided to the population, and the maintenance of the condition of misery of part of the social class. Necropolitics is inserted in a context of selection: those most adapted to the system, those who must continue to keep the “economy going,” remain alive, even if in a precarious way; the reserve workforce, the “useless,” must die, to make room for individuals who will contribute to the *status quo*. This model of social interconnection seems to deal with the erasure of otherness and the trivialization of evil.

Thus, the objective of this study is to undertake a possible understanding of the relationship between neoliberalism and subjectivity and, further, to assimilate how the psychic functioning of the Superego occurs in contemporary times. Furthermore, the path of this theoretical initiative aims to establish a systematic understanding of the psychic relations of authority and authoritarianism in the present day. As a working hypothesis, we start from the idea that with the fall of the Name-of-the-Father, the object relationship is also shaken, which suggests, as proposed by Nakasu (2012), a fall of the ideals of the ego. Thus, the subjects enrolled in contemporary logic begin to deny the existence of what is common among themselves and, even worse, construct the premise of the destruction of what is distinct from the self, in a masochistic enjoyment, imperative of the Superego.

Social bond, anxiety and aggression

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud, 1930/2010), Sigmund Freud, a precursor of psychoanalysis, sought to outline a social understanding, based on psychic functioning, of the origin of suffering, especially grounded in the relationship between social bonds and the malaise imposed by the condition of civilization. The psychoanalyst started from the premise that living in society is something fundamentally distressing, in the sense that collective life is, in itself, a source of suffering. Let us follow the author’s trail.

According to Freud (1930/2010), the subject is primarily governed by what he called the pleasure principle, a motor that drives the living being towards phenomena that produce satisfaction for the Self. It is also true that many of these phenomena are temporary, and therefore, the subject finds drive satisfaction only on certain occasions. The lack of satisfaction of the Self, due to the lack of external phenomenological correspondence, may lead to frustration. From this point on, reality imposes itself on the subject, calling upon another principle, in an attempt to correspond to the drive demands and also to understand the external world. The Self, in this way, becomes more flexible regarding the degree of object investment with the aim of obtaining happiness – here Freud situated the reality principle.

Human beings are, by constitution, aggressive animals (Freud 1930/2010). In order to live in society, the author explained, individuals give up their aggressive drives and this is what makes them feel constantly dissatisfied since the repressed drive no longer finds its destination.

Aggression is introjected, internalized, but it is properly sent back to where it came from, that is, it is directed against the ego itself. There it is welcomed by a part of the ego that opposes itself to the rest as the superego and that, as “conscience”, is willing to exercise against the ego the same severe aggressiveness that the ego would like to satisfy in other individuals. The tension between the rigorous superego and the ego subjected to it is called the conscience of guilt; it manifests itself as a need for punishment. Civilization then controls the dangerous pleasure in aggression that the individual has by weakening him, disarming him and making him be watched by an instance within him, as by a garrison in a conquered city. (Freud, 1930/2010, p. 59)

The conflict that is generated by the interrelation between drive and civilization is, in Freudian theory, something that is impossible to overcome; reality only touches on the sphere of the subject’s management of the aggressive drive, which announces the position of helplessness (Birman, 2016). “(...) On the other hand, stating the irreducibility of helplessness implies recognizing that the subject must do an infinite job of managing it, precisely because the original helplessness of subjectivity would be incurable” (Birman, 2016, p. 137). In addition, subjects emerge who question the libido in movement and guide its direction, thus assuming control over the subjects’ psychic suffering. In contemporary times, this is what occurs in social movements of an extremist nature, such as, for example, the organization of neo-Nazi groups, the assumption of power of leaders with authoritarian tendencies, among countless other events.

Based on this, the violence that is inflicted on the Self – which has been tyrannized by the repressive instance – materializes in the extrapsychic sphere, that is, in the community formations of the subjects. For example, in *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 1913/2012), the primeval horde, upon murdering the father and consolidating the legislative foundation of the Superego, begins to nurture the feeling of remorse, since the dead paternal figure corresponds to the enjoyment of the lack (Cordeiro & Bastos, 2011), which marks the hostility of the fraternity against its own members. It is from this Freudian mythology that one can establish deep roots about the origin of the rivalry between the members of the same society and of different groups. In this sense, according to the analysis undertaken by Freud, it is possible to affirm that suffering is an intrinsic condition of the social experience of human life. Furthermore, sociability itself produces the consciousness of guilt.

The unveiling of the authoritarian dimension and acts of violence

Checchia (2020), supported by the theories of Freud, Lacan and Gross, undertakes a detailed study of the “genealogy” of authoritarianism. According to the author, authoritarianism is based on the complex bond that develops in the Oedipus process, with the sedimentation of the authoritarian psyche from the consolidation of what he calls despotic authority – a restrictive position, in which the subject who occupies it seeks domination and satisfaction of his own enjoyment.

Aggressiveness, once again, comes from the relationship between the Self, in the process of being constituted, and the Other, since the arrangement of power in this nexus is, notably, disproportionate. In other words, the Self – the child – is the most vulnerable part, suffers from the intimidation of other Selves and feels powerless. In the meantime, the Self, the child, submits to the Other in order to survive and this, explains Checchia (2020), provokes a libidinal connection strong enough to trigger pleasure whose origin has a strong sexual component. At first glance, this is an ambiguity: submission to the Other and obtaining pleasure from a servile position. However, the author explains that this pleasure is justified, above all, by the interruption of the intimidation of the Self in the process of being constituted.

It is also possible for the Self to identify with despotic authority, according to Checchia (2020). In order for the Self to no longer be attacked – or to no longer feel attacked – it attacks. For the author, the drive for self-preservation, in this case, is predominant, as it considerably amplifies the aggressive drive of the Self towards the Other, with the aim of narcissistic supremacy. In short, it is due to the enjoyment achieved by placing oneself in an identified position of tyranny that the authoritarian Self is originated.

Regarding authority and authoritarianism, for example, Rudge (2006) explains that hostility fortuitously finds fertile ground to develop in the depths of the subjects’ Superego, due to its ambiguous formation. That is, for the author, repressed hatred will return as a form of aggression towards the Other, due to the fact that there is a primordial lack

and the impossibility of dealing with this dimension. It is from this perspective that one can understand the content of the discourse of countless populist leaders who are on the rise and, to a certain extent, consolidating, in contemporary times. There is, therefore, a dimension of the infantile marked by hatred and suffering behind every leader with evident authoritarian tendencies. “The repetition that is at the base of every drive is supported by the residues of the first experiences of childhood.” (Rudge, 2006, p. 86).

Fortes (2009) makes a detailed analysis of the current form of subjectivation. The author explains that there are subjects who are involved in an imperative relationship of seeking happiness, which translates into an exacerbated hedonism. This incessant search for satisfaction causes all forms of suffering to be devalued and, furthermore, delegitimized, relegating them to the condition of something unsaid. This mode of organization, therefore, produces an existential sensation of emptiness, a disbelief in reality and a disintegration of social ties, a condition called helplessness. Otherness, an essential characteristic for constituting a harmonious social body, has become reduced, since “the other only exists as long as it reinforces the subject’s narcissistic self-exaltation, as a means of feeding the self, and not as a relationship of otherness” (Fortes, 2009, p. 1,127). As a consequence, the author continues, feelings of loneliness and vulnerability arise.

It is theorized by Carvalho (2013), Lustoza et al., (2014), Prata (2012) and Santos (2016) that the helplessness in which the modern subject finds himself is forged by the decline of paternal authority. This occurs, according to Fortes (2009), due to the fall of the project of universal reason, materialized by science and by the abandonment that is felt by this, by religion. The contemporary subject is marked by the condition of autonomy and this produces, notably, the feeling of being unprotected. From this perspective, it becomes possible to establish a relationship of annihilation of the Other, through the execution of acts of violence. Fortes (2009) explains that the contemporary subject does not renounce his enjoyment in order to be able to be part of society; on the contrary, the contemporary subject allows himself to enjoy intensely, because he no longer encounters the prohibitions imposed by authority. “The price we pay for enjoyment is increasingly more risk and, therefore, increasingly less security. The victory of enjoyment over ethics, therefore, exacerbates individualism and weakens solid and lasting emotional bonds” (Fortes, 2009, p. 1,132). Santos (2016), following the same conception, argues that in contemporary times we live what she calls the Sadian imperative of enjoyment, since the Law is notably denied. Taking this as a basis, the thesis arises that “in contemporary times, the Other does not exist” (Santos, 2016, p. 566).

The fundamental contemporary mark: helplessness

Between the erasure of the Other and the freedom of enjoyment, as previously stated, and the rise of discourses guided by the return of conservatism and political-ideological agendas that preach less freedom, there seems to be a kind of temporal lapse, although these are phenomena of the same time. One can also suggest the following: currently, populist leaders have been placing great emphasis on individual “freedom”, however, in practice, one notices that their actions do not seem to support what is said; on the contrary, one observes an accentuation of behaviors in the opposite direction, towards authoritarianism. In this regard, there are two dimensions: political rhetoric and the discursiveness that sustains followers, insatiable by the leader’s personalist magniloquence, but who, deep down, are merely members of a mass waiting for a leader and supposed support. In short: mass issues, as Freud points out in *Mass Psychology and Analysis of the Ego* (1921/2011), must now be fueled by a perspective of valorization of the individual subject by the leader. The leader must love the masses and each subject in this entourage, as if he knew them deeply, because this is the demand for the regime to sustain itself. Furthermore, the leader finds “fertile ground” in the helpless condition of contemporary times: since the subjects no longer have the Law to guide them, their references have fallen – it is in this vacuum that the personalist figure of the leader enters. With his fiery speech, with his characteristic “of the people, for the people”, the master will become the one who leads the subjects towards the supposed progress.

Along the same lines, Cardoso (2018) analyzes the functioning of trauma, going through the libidinal economy of contemporary subjects, and assumes that they live in a state of “beyond malaise”. There is currently a peculiarity experienced: the radicalization of psychic defenses, which promotes borderline states, writes the author. “(...) we would be facing a beyond ‘malaise’ whose expression, among many other figures, would be the insistent presence in subjects of a narcissistic expectation of an unlimited nature, assuming a visible lack of knowledge of their suffering, more precisely, of their psychic pain” (Cardoso, 2018, p. 155). Quintella (2016) proposes the thesis that the contemporary subject organizes himself in a very peculiar defensive manner, specific to the moment, which he calls the denial of deprivation. Deprivation occurs, the author explains, in the transition from the second to the third logical time of the Oedipus complex, a moment in which the child’s ego ideal is consolidated in relation to the father. In the case of the process proposed by the author, in the denial of deprivation, the child does not introject the paternal image in the position of this ideal, but

(...) The subject replaces the ego ideal with his own fantasy of narcissistic omnipotence, subjugated to the primary representation of the Wonderful Child, whose corollary is the range of sufferings that emerge in contemporary times, implied in experiences of excess and depressive symptoms. (Quintella, 2016, p. 120)

In contemporary times, the ideals that previously guided subjects are harassed, rendering them helpless, given that the denial of deprivation leaves these subjects in a position of pulsional impotence (Quintella, 2016). For the author, the main purpose of denying deprivation is to free the subject from castration, through an exacerbated strengthening of the Superego, making it much more powerful, violent and compulsive. It is in this sense that denial is an aspect of neurosis: it is a way out found by the subject so that he does not succumb to the unacceptable condition of castration, through excess and self-affirmation of supposed narcissistic omnipotence (Quintella, 2016).

It is based on this that we can understand some facts about the expression of behavior of some current subjects, reproduced, in part, by the media apparatus, as seen, for example, in speech expressions such as: “Do you know who you are talking to?”, “Citizen, no. Civil engineer, better than you!” (Suzuki, 2020). These expressions were used during the COVID-19 pandemic, in different regions of Brazil, by people who refused to wear masks, to practice physical distancing, or even simply because they considered themselves superior to others – who followed the recommendations of science, in a clear movement of denial of scientific discourse. There is, evidently, a narcissistic exacerbation of these subjects and a violent and growing imposition of their own imperative of enjoyment, when expressing these communicative contents, which demonstrates the fragility of the Self in accepting its own condition of being marked by lack. By referring to a supposed characteristic of superiority, the contemporary person deeply marks his point of structural vulnerability, which denotes the denial of castration.

(...) The ideological trick consisted of superimposing the institutionalized violence of impersonal authority, as the foundation of social difference, with the impossibility of answering such a question oneself and personally. The operation is equivalent to placing a master signifier in the position of agent of a discourse. In the formula cited, there is no meaning that gives consistency to “who is speaking”. The master signifier, in this position, is asemantic, it asks for obedience, it does not ask for understanding – exactly like a name, it designates but does not signify. We never know exactly and precisely who we are speaking to. We receive from the Other our own message, desiring, unconscious and ideological, in an inverted form. We are always addressing the other, close or known, and, at the same time, the others who form our history, the others who inhabit our fantasy, the intimately unknown others. (Dunker, 2015, p. 75)

“Do as I say, not as I do”

Furthermore, Fortes (2009) makes an important observation: contemporary times bear the mark of hedonism and also of advanced individualism. As the process of increasing individual traits becomes more pronounced, citizenship loses ground, the public space shrinks and becomes delegitimized. It is therefore notable that the fall of the Law produces disorganization at the individual and collective levels. “The weakening of the State as a figure that protects and watches over citizens ends up generating, in the latter, a climate of insecurity, which also refers to vulnerability (...)” (Fortes, 2009, p. 1136). For Santos (2016), the intensification of capitalism and, consequently, the consolidation of neoliberalism, increases the subject’s incessant search for enjoyment, through the cultural industry and the massification of media exploitation.

Another very important phenomenon to consider, based on the logic of capitalist production and advertising montage, is the relationship between truth and lies. For Santos (2016), truth, today, has become fragmented and particular, and can be shaped according to the will of each speaking being, since it no longer carries with it an absolute, inviolable, untouchable value; on the contrary, truth has become, as the author writes, a “truth-fiction”. It is from this that Siebert and Pereira (2020) argue about the phenomenon called post-truth, a concept that assumes the contour of subjective meaning.

From a discursive perspective, we understand that we signify the world through language and act upon it symbolically, permeated by the unconscious, interdiscourse, history, and, ultimately, by the set of social, historical, and symbolic circumstances that we call conditions of meaning production. These conditions legitimize ideological positions of interpretation, serving as a guiding thread between sayings from the past and statements from the present. In relation to the term post-truth, we identify its first use as a condition of broad production. (Siebert & Pereira, 2020, p. 243)

Furthermore, it is essential to mention the social consequences that this entire mode of operation causes. Therefore, let us continue. A significant aspect of authoritarian populism, which many South American countries experience, as is the case in Brazil, finds its explanation in the movement produced by the representation of the sovereign, of the leader, over the anguish of reality on the part of the members of the mass of a given nation. Birman (2017) explains that anguish of reality occurs when there is a rupture of social ties and beliefs in the powers of the sovereign. Still for the author, two exits can be produced, namely: (a) the subjects seek another sovereign; or (b) they establish horizontal ties with each other, recognizing their conditions of helplessness and their own singularities. Now, it is clear that this second aspect consists of an exit closer to sublimation, however, this is not what occurs in the populisms analyzed here.

It is worth noting that the ultraconservative populist advance is not limited to South America, but has become a global phenomenon, affecting much older and more consolidated democracies, such as Austria, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Hungary, Turkey, the Philippines, etc., having in common the ability to capture the libido in

movement of disoriented subjects, placing them in a condition of idolatry. What happens, however, is that the leader occupies the position of sovereignty at a given moment, that is, the libido will change again, if he stops producing identification in the controlled mass. This is what is currently called, in several governments, an ideological or radical base. In this sense, it is necessary to use rhetoric to keep his entourage mobilized. This tool, however, should not be used in an elaborate manner; on the contrary, the sovereign must place himself in a position of simplicity, of fraternity with his dominated ones, because, in this way, his power will not be broken. For Safatle (2008), this operating logic is called cynicism.

(...) cynicism can be understood as the subjective position possible for a subject who has internalized the Law under the figure of a superego that demands that conduct be guided by the logic of pure enjoyment. For this incessant search for immediate satisfaction cannot simply override the normative criteria of rationalization of the practical dimension, which in the current stage of enlightenment would be intersubjectively shared and consensual. (...) In other words, it is enough that they are followed in a cynical manner, making them justify the opposite of what they seemed to index. In this way, the normative “suffering of indeterminacy” capable of causing symptoms such as anxiety and depression can appear, within cynicism, as a reason for enjoyment. (Safatle, 2008, pp. 138-139)

It is based on these arguments that we can affirm, as Carvalhaes et al. (2020) do, that the condition of Latin American populisms, including Brazil, is one of trivialization of evil. An enemy group or enemy groups are suggested with the aim of segregating society. Due to the fact that the World Health Organization (WHO) stated that a virus had been detected in Wuhan, in the province of Hubei, China (Pan American Health Organization, 2021), some leaders of nations began an ongoing process of xenophobia and contempt for the Chinese people. Statements were made, for the most part, in the sense of discriminating, insulting and stereotyping; terms such as “communavirus” (communist virus) (Zarur, 2021), “Chinese virus” (Martins, 2021) and “*vachina*” (Retz, 2021) were created to generate offense and hatred. Due to ideological implications, vaccination against COVID-19, which began on January 17, 2021, in the state of São Paulo (Cristaldo & Brandão, 2021), was sabotaged and delayed in Brazil. It was only at the end of the second half of 2021 that Brazil managed to vaccinate around 77% of the population with at least one dose; 64% with both doses or a single dose; approximately 9% with the booster dose (Bertoni, 2021).

In short, what we can observe is that the regimes of coloniality of power are therefore articulated as a system that classifies different human groups based on characteristics that demarcate differences (physical, territorial and cultural), consolidating a process of trivializing the potential for evil that discredits and makes otherness invisible as equally human. (Carvalhaes et al., 2020, p. 4)

Reality, death drive and self-abandonment

In contemporary times, the unconscious is silenced and the body is placed in a position of leading speech (Ferrari et al., 2020). The symbolic register is stripped of its initial condition, marked as the foundation of the subjective body, and the Law is denied. The symptom, in this perspective, is formed by direct intervention in reality, assuming a perspective of high intensity, lack of representation and trauma. From this conception, we can infer the formation of masses of “hate” in Latin American populisms of the 21st century.

With the denial of the Other, with the traumatic dimension of enjoyment exposed in-itself and with the mobilization of libido towards the leader, the contemporary subject becomes a simple being-in-the-world. Ferrari et al. (2020) explain that the symptoms of contemporaneity are marked by disorientation. Necropolitics is, therefore, the way in which the State uses to select friends and enemies.

Amid the problem of the pandemic as a reality that imposes itself, one can therefore observe, in a disturbing way, the prevalence of the death drive and the dimension of denial. By focusing on what has been happening in Brazil, it illuminates the necropolitical management of killable bodies revealed by COVID-19, which appears even in seemingly natural questions, such as: “Some are going to die anyway! So what?”, said by the head of the Brazilian Executive Branch on April 28, 2020, when Brazil had 5,017 people dead from the novel coronavirus (Bertoni et al., 2021). The alliance between science and capital is revealed and questions the value of life and the current logic of social bonds. In the scenario, therefore, the central figure of helplessness that plagues everyone appears, for some experienced in a radical way, demanding that subjects/citizens exercise their resources in the direction of knowing how to deal with the unnameable (Ferrari et al., 2020, p. 576).

Man (2020) makes important contributions regarding the subject’s encounter with enigmatic objects. Throughout her work, the author makes extensive use of the psychosocial consequences engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic to say that anxiety, anguish, compulsion, and violence are productions of these times for a possible attachment to the reality of the world. An important consideration is made, however, with the fact that, for the psychoanalyst, men create rigid defenses that deny certain phenomena, in order to protect themselves against a threat of annihilation. By denying an event, one immediately denies what is negative in relation to the Self.

According to the author, during the physical distancing period during the pandemic, there was a significant increase in forms of compulsion, such as sex, social media, consumption, etc. Furthermore, it is known that consumption is a basic premise of capitalism – it intensified during neoliberalism and its even more perverse face, consumerism, emerged – in this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic further accentuated the phenomenon of consumerism, due to the compulsion to repeat. From this, then, we can understand the inertia of populist leaders in the face of the greatest health crisis in the last hundred years: by allowing the virus to circulate, precarious labor is eliminated, expenses are cut, and, furthermore, the privileged, who can remain physically distant, due to the fact that they do not need to be exposed to mandatory work contact, keep the economy going, that is, they remain confined and consume compulsively. This is the grotesque dimension of neoliberalism: the union between barbarism and bureaucratic rationality in favor of death and the great elites.

Nakasu (2012) focused on an investigation into the constitution of the Superego in Freudian theory, demonstrating that such an instance has its genesis established not only from the dissolution of the Oedipus complex, but also as a differentiation of part of the Id, since the energy that drove the formation of the Superego is provided in primitive states of development. Furthermore, the author works on the interesting thesis that the Superego found in the Id the inheritance of object investments. Furthermore, due to these aspects, the activities of the censoring instance can be understood by the dynamics of reactive formation.

By taking over the libido of the investments of resigned objects of the id, the ego sublimates sexual goals and favors drive defusion; it therefore becomes incapable of connecting the destructive component of drives. This destructive component of drives is released as an inclination toward aggression and destruction. (...) Drive diffusion therefore increases the destructive drive component. The ego places itself at the service of the death drives because it plays a leading role in the game of identifications. In turn, if the superego is the part of the ego modified by these same identifications, all destruction released via identification will be used in its imperative character. The consequence of drive diffusion is, therefore, the release of the aggressive drives in the superego. (Nakasu, 2012, p. 472)

Based on this, the Self becomes the main stage of a great instinctual conflict, which provides the development of aggression against oneself and against what is distinct from the Ideal-Self (Nakasu, 2012). It is at this point that Han (2015) establishes his conception of excess positivity in the present day. As the death drive moves in the constitutive energies of the Id and this, in turn, exerts influence on the composition of the Superego, the object relationship itself becomes shaken, which suggests, as Nakasu (2012) calls it, the fall of the Ideal-Self, the decline of the Name-of-the-Father. Therefore, there is a lack of mutual recognition between the subjects involved and, furthermore, they have the desire to destroy others, of that which is distinct from the self, in a masochistic enjoyment, imperative of the Superego that cannot help but enjoy.

Given the drive diffusion and the increase in the terrifying actions of the death drive, the Superego intensifies the recriminations and punishments in the Self for demands for enjoyment, which can cause the Self to abandon itself (Nakasu, 2012). From this perspective, aggression can find two futures: (a) remain self-absorbed in the domains of subjectivity or (b) externalize itself in the social field. From the second path it is possible to think about contemporary phenomena. For example, Brazilian populism is anchored in the idea of nationalism, which in turn is an ideal based on the idea that Brazil should be independent, sovereign and free from any external or internal domination – radical logic of paranoia: either/or. However, in practice, the political class – with greater emphasis after the far-right took over the Federal Government in 2018 – which claims to be patriotic and nationalist, as a form of political discourse, left the country at the mercy of viral spread during the COVID-19 pandemic, by refusing to purchase vaccines and implement essential health measures to reduce contagion. In this vein, the Brazilian far-right movement was able to recruit these individuals who were in a process of repression, whose aggressiveness was directed at themselves, generating a self-abandonment due to this repressed aggressiveness. By placing a so-called ordinary individual as the ultimate representative, libido was reorganized and aggressiveness began to be legitimized as a possibility of externalization.

The body, the feminine and otherness

Furthermore, regarding the resolute aspect of this psychosocial tangle, it is possible to distinguish some paths. They are not presented, evidently, in a sectioned manner; on the contrary, they are interdependent on each other, in a phenomenon of concausality. Birman (2017) brilliantly explains that, in order to dismantle the neoliberal premise, as has been exposed so far in this study, it is essential that the subject genuinely recognizes his or her lack of self-sufficiency. “(...) By recognizing his or her lack of self-sufficiency, the subject could recognize the other as an equal” (Birman, 2017, p. 119).

Furthermore, Birman (2016) theorizes, based on the same previous conception, that the dimensions of corporeality and femininity are fundamental to overcoming neoliberal logic. Since, according to the author, the subject, advocated by Freud, is embodied and incorporated, that is, it reveals the inextricable fact of human fallibility, erogeneity and the existence of the pulsional face.

The body is regulated by the destinies of drives and desire. The language and thought of the body are then marked by the logic of desire, modulated by its unfolding and variations. It is desire, therefore, that achieves the harmony and dissonance of the registers of thought and language. It is through this mediation that the finitude, incompleteness and uncertainty of the subject are revealed. (Birman, 2016, p. 95)

Furthermore, there is an aspect of femininity that touches, as proposed by Freud, on the absence of the *phallus*, the universal reference of the structuring constitution of the Self, which produces fragmentation and contact with the undeniable circumstance of uncertainty and death. Dealing with femininity, therefore, lies in the dimension of impotence for the contemporary subject. It is precisely through the control and management of helplessness that subjects will be able to organize the erotic destiny of the drive, therefore, feminine (Birman, 2016). Radical social transformations, therefore, will occur from a perspective of projection of possibility, in view of the subjective elaboration of each person regarding the feminine dimension of their own existence and the acceptance of the lack that marks the origin of the self, from a perspective of recognition of non-self-sufficiency. This is a profound but necessary challenge.

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