

As If There Were No Tomorrow: New Year's CovidFests in Brazil

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The clash between the Brazilian president and the local authorities sent confusing signals regarding the COVID-19 pandemic to the population. Many debates were raging across social media on whether people should stay home or keep the economy running. Nevertheless, with the intensification of the pandemic and the prolonged restrictive measures, many people started to disrespect social distancing and, with the premature reopening of the economy in many cities, agglomerate. Even with restrictions on agglomeration by state and municipal governments and the cancellation of traditional New Year's Eve events in Brazil, the turn of the year was characterized by illegal agglomeration in various states. The aim of the article is to explain why there were so many illegal New Year's parties—known as CovidFests—in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the restrictions on agglomeration. The main argument indicates that CovidFests are connected to the lack of social belonging in Brazilian society, which reflects the ongoing necropolitics in the country and the dissemination of a furious melancholy, when discouragement becomes destructive.

Keywords: New Year's parties, Brazil, pandemic, necropolitics, furious melancholy

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a slowdown in the global economy and the cancellation of public events (Diniz & Carino, 2020). Many businesses and venues were affected by social distancing measures, such as cinemas, hotels, restaurants, and public events and parties (Maranhão, 2020). When the COVID-19 pandemic started, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro called for the population to get back to work and his efforts to undermine regional governments' shutdowns have appalled critics and sparked a political rebellion by the governors and many mayors (Cheatham, 2020). However, cities and states gradually established more flexible rules, and many people disrespected social distancing and did not wear masks (Jesus, 2020).

The clash between the president and the local authorities sent confusing signals to the Brazilian population. Many debates were raging across social media on whether people should stay home or keep the economy running (Iglesias & Adghirni, 2020). Nevertheless, with the intensification of the pandemic and the prolonged restrictive measures, many people started to disrespect social distancing and, with the premature reopening of the economy in many cities, agglomerate. Even with restrictions on agglomeration by state and municipal governments and the cancellation of traditional New Year's Eve events in Brazil, the turn of the year was characterized by illegal agglomeration in various states. On the first day of 2021, Brazil surpassed 195,000

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deaths caused by COVID-19 and had more than 7.7 million infected since the beginning of the pandemic (G1, 2021). The aim of the article is to explain why there were so many illegal New Year's parties—known as CovidFests—in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the restrictions on agglomeration. I argue that CovidFests are connected to the lack of social belonging in Brazilian society, which reflects the ongoing necropolitics in the country and the dissemination of a furious melancholy, when discouragement becomes destructive.

The New Year's Parties in Brazil During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the week that Brazil had almost 200,000 deaths caused by COVID-19, crowds flocked, with no masks, hand sanitizers, and social distancing, at parties on Ipanema beach, Leblon, Santa Teresa, and other neighborhoods in the city of Rio de Janeiro, despite the most basic instructions for avoiding the infection by the new coronavirus. Rio de Janeiro was not the only city with CovidFests by the end of 2020. Even with the increase in the number of deaths and infected people, the shocking images of CovidFests came from all over Brazil (Torres, 2021). Because of the sanitary barriers for trips abroad, the state of Bahia was one of the preferred destinations for more affluent travelers, most of them coming from São Paulo. Preferences were Caraíva and Trancoso, a Porto Seguro's district, where agglomeration was registered in public squares, bars, and illegal private parties. In the Brazilian state of Amapá a clandestine party that brought together about 300 people, mostly young men and women and teenagers, was interrupted by Military Police. In the Federal District, a farm hotel was closed for holding a clandestine party which violated the protocols to combat COVID-19. In the state of Ceará the Military Police prevented an irregular party at a concert hall in Maracanaú. In São Vicente, on the coast of the state of São Paulo, thousands of young people gathered at a party, known as “pancadão”. In Caraguatatuba, also in São Paulo, the police were called in to contain agglomeration on the Martim de Sá beach. In Cajueiro da Praia, in the state of Piauí the Department of Health and the Public Ministry closed a resort located in the village of Barrinha, because the establishment was promoting a New Year's Eve party with crowds. In Natividade, in the state of Tocantins, the agglomeration took place during the inauguration of the elected mayor. In Betim, in the state of Minas Gerais, at least two electronic music parties were interrupted in the New Year's Eve. In the state of Santa Catarina, people agglomerated in the city of Balneário Camboriú at the turn of the year (G1, 2021).

Necropolitics and Furious Melancholy

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected creative economy, which includes activities, goods and services based on individual and collective talent. Great events such as New Year's parties are important for creative industries all over Brazil because they generate income and jobs, bring tourists, and promote the country's international image (Figueiredo, Jesus, Robaina, & Couri, 2019; Jesus & Kamlot, 2016; Jesus, Kamlot, & Dubeux, 2019). Creative economy was important for Brazilian economic growth in the last previous decades, together with agribusiness, manufacturing industry, and some traditional commercial activities (Jesus, 2011; 2012; 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many creative professionals lost their jobs and depended on savings and the government financial support. Freelancers and events producers have been hit the hardest (Brewer, 2020; Jesus, 2020).

During the Spanish flu pandemic (1918-1920), there was solidarity among people in all Brazilian cities. However, the CovidFests' agglomeration scenes show a degraded society which has lost its values of belonging.

An effect of the lack of social belonging is that Brazilian people seem unable to mourn the dead, pretending that they do not exist (Schwarcz & Starling, 2020). According to Chalhoub (1996), pandemics like the COVID-19 stimulate the social Darwinism, which believes in the survival of the fittest. The disease caused a greater number of deaths among older people, and party goers do not usually belong to groups at risk, although recent data show the growth of cases among young people, including gay men who define their identity based on the assimilationist logic of pink capitalism (Jesus, 2014; 2017), present in some CovidFests.

COVID-19 potentiates necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003; 2018), which is the ultimate expression of sovereignty and resides in the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Necropolitics predicates life on the death of the others—certain lives are more vulnerable than others (Jesus, 2009; 2010)—and includes the right to impose social and civil death, as well as the right to enslave others and alternative forms of political violence. An epidemic or pandemic may be an effusive moment for biopolitics (Foucault, 1997): in the name of collective protection, bodies can be controlled. However, all biopolitics becomes necropolitics when inequality regimes determine which bodies are at risk (Diniz & Carino, 2020). Brazilian society is visibly disrespectful to the elderly, for example. This is clear when the Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro said his past as an athlete would protect him against COVID-19. The perception on the part of young people is that it is worth taking the risk and worrying less about the danger they pose as COVID-19 transmitters (Torres, 2021). The deaths are routinized as unavoidable consequences in the context of the dehumanization and the depoliticization of mortality (Burton-Cartledge, 2020; Tyner, 2019), a situation that can be seen in the COVID-19 New Year's CovidFests.

According to Birman (2020), Brazilian people started to show during the COVID-19 pandemic a state of furious melancholy, when discouragement becomes destructive. Its main raw material would be the contradictory messages on social distancing among municipal, state, and federal governments. The population ended up being disoriented and with no prospects. People lost their hope. Certain forms of melancholy have a dimension of destructiveness, like someone who defies death at a New Year's CovidFest with hundreds of people.

Conclusions and Final Considerations

Birman (2020) argued that political leaders should calm the population with clearer plans on restrictions, but also present deadlines and perspectives for the future. The political struggle between the federal and the local governments should not divert the attention from the precarious living and health conditions of most Brazilian population. Collaboration among authorities is fundamental to face the new challenges, as well as the cooperation among people standing up to COVID-19 to reduce the pandemic's progression (Kamlot & Jesus, 2020).

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