

Bioethical and Biopolitical Considerations Concerning Racism and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Chile

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Given the great shockwaves caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which in recent months has shaken the whole world, there is cause to suspect that this may have led to the perceptual error that the pandemic is exclusively a health-related issue. Given that this perceptual error is not insignificant, it must be addressed reflectively and critically.

That is, there appears to be a worldwide perception that the pandemic relates only to the outbreak of an unforeseen and fatal anomaly in the infinitesimal order of organic life. In doing so we may be obfuscating the political and economic dimensions that define the capitalist world order. Moreover, if we also allow ourselves to consider the fact that, in the current historical context, scientific research has assumed the form of a hegemonic program of management and control of human life, undeniably linked to the objectives and interests of that same global capital, this forces us to ask many unsettling questions regarding the prospects for purely scientific solutions to the crisis.

To completely depoliticize the analysis of this pandemic and reduce it to the simple dramatic and statistical exposition of its morbid expression—which is indeed extremely distressing—as authorities and mass media report, causes us to lose sight of a dimension that perhaps explains the problem more accurately. For this reason, I feel that we should not err by falling into an anodyne indulgence and end up acquiescent to the idea that everything has just been some sort of “fatal destiny” that has befallen humanity. Doubtless there will be very particular political—and perhaps even personal—responsibilities which will at some point have to be established in relation to its causes, particularly the responsibility of all those who today seem to show more concern for the recovery of the economy than the health of the population.

In this respect, an analysis that is also bioethical and biopolitical—and not solely biomedical—of the deleterious effects of the current planetary viral catastrophe will allow us to understand that human life, for a long time and in many different ways, has been edging closer to an abyss, perhaps today more than ever. As Michel Foucault once stated, “the biological is reflected in the political” (Foucault 1991:172). This perspective requires that we deconstruct the judicial-institutional power structure of neoliberalism on which the social order has sought to sustain itself and which has established a damagingly unequal economic model. It is a historical condition that has favored the growing and extreme worsening of the COVID-19 pandemic we are currently witnessing. As Judith Butler recently stated, the situation can also be described as “pandemic capitalism” (Butler 2020).

In situations of health resource scarcity and increasingly complex predictive models for infection, it is hard to guarantee that health systems in poorer countries possess the necessary intensive care treatment for all those who may need it (Aurenque et al. 2020). Given that the present situation is governed by market rationality, the only calculating strategy is to ask “Which lives are more worth saving than others?”

Clearly, the lethality of the virus, its systemic and disastrous impact in the long term, will most likely be felt by those nations in which the healthcare structures are generally more deficient. It is in those nations where the continuance or the abrupt termination of citizens' lives often depends on either the good will of medical professionals or their personal bioethical codes.

Now, unquestionably, among the globe's most deprived demographic segments, there are migrants and displaced persons who have fled their countries of origin to seek less precarious life conditions. They may, for example, seek to escape economic vulnerability deriving from the shortage of employment that exists in their homelands. This fuels high expectations to secure better opportunities for work in new countries, providing the possibility of earning incomes considerably greater than those they would have received prior to migrating, with the added potential of a gradual improvement in the wellbeing of family members with whom they migrate and those who remain in their country of origin.

Towards the end of the last century, Chile began to achieve economic success, and made significant progress in the processes of modernization, allowing it to occupy a position of some political and economic supremacy within Latin America. The country then began to see a significant increase in migration to fill the gap in unskilled labor. Until very recently (prior to the social explosion of October 18 2019),¹ Chile had sought to understand itself as a culturally homogeneous nation—European even—and an exception from the Latin American context (Correa 2016:43). In tandem with the growing wave of migration, in recent years, a seed of racism has begun to grow in within the Chilean population, and revealing xenophobic attitudes and behavioral tendencies which Chileans might not have understood as forming part of their experience (Canales 2019). This has worsened the already precarious situation of migrants (even more so in the global context of the 2020 pandemic). In this respect, it can be said that the stigmatization to which they have been subjected in the past has acquired a new and more pronounced quality at present.

For example, Chilean media have focused mainly on the country's Metropolitan Region where COVID-19 infections are primarily concentrated. In this context, it is common to see political authorities interviewed on television emphatically denouncing those living in low-income communities—where migrants normally live—stressing their careless approach to healthcare behaviors (i.e., failure to observe quarantines, lack of social distancing, not using masks and others instances of this kind), while, curiously, simultaneously reacting much less emphatically in regard to these behaviors when they are observed among people living in the city's high-income areas. Thus, migrants, especially the racialized and poor, are now much more subject to stereotyping, forms of discriminatory social control, and expressions of moral sanction in the context of the pandemic. An extreme manifestation of their conditions of marginalization are painfully expressed in their desperation to return to their countries of origin: At the same time that the health crisis is depriving them of the life they have cultivated in Chile, they find themselves obligated to camp in the very worst conditions for weeks outside of their respective embassies to beg for repatriation.

Since the coronavirus outbreak began, the cameras of Chilean TV channels, have focused heavily on the districts inhabited by the people with the lowest incomes in the city of Santiago—Haitian immigrants mostly, but also Dominicans, Peruvians, Bolivians, and more—gathering sensational material with headlines such as, "Virus outbreak in Haitian migrant community", quickly becoming big stories. Thus, the presence of the virus becomes

¹ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/30/chile-protests-portraits-protesters-sebastian-pinera>

dramatically racialized, and this is accomplished through a strange fusion—or confusion, rather—of the disease, ethnicity, and the places of residence of the poorest people. The camps—precarious human settlements often situated on the outskirts, far from the center, and inhabited by many poor non-nationals in overcrowded conditions, have been subjected to very similar media treatment (Ramírez 2020).

It seems difficult for Chileans to imagine that whoever passes on the coronavirus could be someone close to you. That perhaps this is why they attempt to seek out a non-national “other” whose body can be considered as pathogen in terms of both epidemiology and poverty. The point is, therefore, that under these circumstances, blame and causation are directed at migrants for propagating the virus. This cannot be a mere coincidence (Tijoux 2020).

Lastly, it needs to be pointed out that these kinds of prejudices against migrants unleash social violence, aggression and prejudicial attitudes that lead to a hatred of difference and produce offensive attitudes that bring, in the end, only misfortune that in this case manifests in the social death that looms over the precarious lives of migrants from the moment of their arrival in Chile, and which only exacerbates that other type of imminent death that lurks in the pandemic.

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