



Article

Bolsonarist obscurantism, neoliberalism and academic productivism

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Abstract

The implications of Bolsonarism for the production and diffusion of knowledge in Brazilian public institutions of higher learning are analyzed in this article through the development of three theoretical arguments. The first one is that Bolsonarism is part of a broader sociocultural phenomenon that is obscurantism, which therefore requires an understanding of the processes that feed obscurantism worldwide and particularly in Brazil. The second is that obscurantism is connected in a non-accidental way with neoliberalism, taken here to mean the contemporary form of organizing not only the economy but all social practice and, consequently, the different dimensions of human life. The central political and ideological vector of neoliberalism is that the freedom of individuals can only be ensured by a society that is commanded by the spontaneity of the market. The neoliberal defense of freedom is, in reality, an imprisonment of society to a perspective that removes from human beings the possibility for making choices about the future of humanity. In this sense, the fight against Bolsonarism may not achieve significant results if it is not part of the struggle for the liberation of society from its entrapment by market logic. The third argument presented in this article is that productivism, as an academic expression of neoliberalism, configures the production and dissemination of knowledge in public institutions of higher learning in a way that favors the penetration of obscurantism into academic life.

Keywords: Bolsonarism, Obscurantism, Neoliberalism, Academic productivism.

Introduction

The obscurantism that characterizes the vision of society, culture, politics, and education expressed by President Jair Bolsonaro on the most diverse occasions is well known, and is almost always delivered in a belligerent style, employing language incompatible with the decorum required by the position held. However, is the obscurantism and attitude of permanent

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belligerence a political and cultural phenomenon restricted to extreme right-wing groups that simply disagree with the ethos of the rest of Brazilian society? Unfortunately, the evidence does not support this kind of evaluation. One initial fact to be noted is that, in addition to the retrograde and dangerous culture fed by extreme right-wing groups, there is a numerically considerable contingent of the current Brazilian population who, regardless of whether or not they back the incumbent president of the republic, subscribe to ideas and behavior connected to worldviews in which the belligerent spirit and obscurantist irrationality prevail. There are many examples of these ideas and behavior, among which we may cite the following: promotion of a culture of firearm use by ordinary citizens; denial of human rights; concurrence with the idea that the death and eventual extermination of the prison population is desirable; an identification between authority and the use of physical and verbal violence; support for police violence against the black population, homophobia, machismo, denial of the democratic state's secularity, hostility towards teachers, artists, scientists, journalists and intellectuals in general; distrust of the sciences; disregard of the environmental issue; a view of social life as a permanent state of war; the demonization of people on the left of the political spectrum; criminalization of social movements; verbal violence on social networks; hostility towards people because of the choices they make in their personal lives etc.

Conflicts between Bolsonarism and the Federal Supreme Court led to the fall of Education Minister, Abraham Weintraub and his hasty departure from Brazil, raising the suspicion of a getaway. This was a loss for Bolsonarism, as Weintraub was one of the main members of the so-called "ideological wing" of Bolsonaro's government, including the president of the republic himself, as well as ministers and advisors linked to extreme right-wing religious leaders and the ideas and orientations of former astrologer Olavo de Carvalho, an obscurantist influencer living in the US since 2005. According to reports in the written press, Weintraub's departure from the government was well-received by the Minister of the Economy, Paulo Guedes, who considered the extremely aggressive and inadequate speech and attitudes of the Education Minister an obstacle to the negotiations necessary for the approval of neoliberal reforms. The Minister of the Economy is seen by some as not being part of the government's "ideological wing", because he is not interested in the controversies provoked by the "Olavists" and maintains his focus on state reform. However, the idea that there is an ideological and a non-ideological wing in the Bolsonaro government has been questioned by several analysts, such as Igor Tadeu Camilo Rocha, who argues as follows:

The construction carried out by characterizing a wing of the government as "ideological," because it is based on agendas that are denialist, anti-scientific, conspiratorial, and regressive in terms of human rights, also ends up accentuating a supposed "non-ideological" character in the other members of the government's base. The serious effect of this is to depoliticize central aspects of the Bolsonarist government and thus greatly impoverish the critical debate about it. It is necessary to keep in mind that all the "wings" of this and other governments' bases are ideological and this, in itself, is not a

problem. To claim the contrary only means that certain ideological behavior of various agents of the Bolsonaro government has become standard practice, being naturalized to the point that, although ideological, it is not perceived in that way. (ROCHA, 2019, p. 3)

Every government, whether right, center or left leaning, makes decisions and choices, implements projects and adopts attitudes that express ideological options. The ideological character of an extreme right-wing government, such as that of Jair Bolsonaro, is so explicit that it becomes practically impossible for anyone to participate in government without sharing at least part of the obscurantist worldview. But this still remains at the level of ideological option for the person holding a government position, and this article is not concerned with analyzing the personal characteristics of federal government members. The relevance of questioning the coincidence or essentiality of the connections between the neoliberalism represented by Paulo Guedes and the obscurantism represented by Jair Bolsonaro lies in the fact that this is a problem that goes beyond the individual characters of current Brazilian politics.

Is neoliberalism, in fact, indifferent to ideological clashes? Is obscurantism, with its anti-democratic implications, a political and ideological phenomenon without essential ties to the neoliberal vision of society? Could neoliberalism be dissociated from obscurantism and, with its supposed technical neutrality, engage with governments effectively committed to the strengthening, expansion and deepening of democracy in Brazil? In other words: in a hypothetical situation where Bolsonaroism disappeared from the political and ideological scene or was reduced to a few extreme right-wing groups, yet the neoliberal guidelines of economic policy maintained, would Brazilian democracy be preserved? Would Brazilian culture be safe from obscurantism and could public institutions of higher learning dedicate themselves to teaching, research, and extension activities from a perspective of democratization in the production and dissemination of knowledge?

We fear, however, that Bolsonaroism is not the greatest obstacle to Brazilian democracy. In spite of the necessary struggle for the reversal of this phenomenon's influence on public life in our country, under penalty of the barbarism perhaps becoming irreversible, it is necessary to consider the hypothesis that a weakening of Bolsonaroism may not entail a similar reduction in the influence of obscurantism as a wider socio-cultural phenomenon. There are deeper roots to the global dissemination of reactionary and anti-humanist worldviews. These roots can be found in the social processes that have produced the strengthening, since the 1980s, of neoliberalism as a hegemonic worldview, further accentuated by the 2008 economic crisis. The more acute and insoluble the problems generated by capitalism are, the more intense the ideological struggle becomes to convince the entire population that the only form of social organization that preserves individual freedom is that of the society commanded by the market economy, that is, by capital.

Thus, in the first item of this article, we will try to substantiate the thesis outlined in the previous paragraph, by analyzing elements of neoliberal theorizations that show how this worldview removes from human beings any

possibility for a conscious collective construction of a blueprint for society that in overcoming capitalism becomes more human, fairer and more sustainable.

In the second item we will present arguments on the links between neoliberalism and academic productivism which, over the last three decades, has become the *modus operandi* for work involving knowledge production in universities, with strongly negative impacts on the type of knowledge produced, the development of researchers, and teaching on undergraduate and graduate courses. We will defend the thesis that academic culture formatted by productivist logic has acted as a Trojan horse that favors the entry of obscurantism into the university environment.

We conclude the article with the alert that the adaptation of academic life to the logic of productivism is not an effective strategy in terms of the survival of public institutions of higher learning in Brazil.

1. Neoliberalism as humanity's rendition to the omnipotence of the market.

One observation that needs to be made at the beginning of this item is that we are aware that scholars of neoliberalism make distinctions between the schools of economic and social thought that have been gathered together under this name. Garrison (2007), for example, states that in the battle of ideas, Hayek of the Austrian school and Friedmann of the Chicago school are, in certain respects, "soul mates" and at other times adversaries. According to Garrison, Hayek's book *Constitution of Liberty*, published in 1960, and Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom*, published in 1962, are works that share the same vision of society, while these two neoliberal thinkers differed in their economic theorizations on, for example, the question of monetary policy. For the purposes of this article, however, we are more interested in what unites the schools of neoliberal thought than what differentiates them.

In this sense, an initial point to be addressed is that of the economization of society, which is the basis of the interpretation that the Minister of the Economy, Paulo Guedes, represents the technical wing of Jair Bolsonaro's government. The economization of society is a process in which economic policy is autonomized and placed above other spheres of public life, resulting in the depoliticization of decisions regulating social activities, as shown by Madra & Adaman (2014) in their article *Neoliberal reason and its forms: depoliticisation through economisation*. These authors see neoliberalism not as one of the several integral options of the political landscape, but rather as the political landscape itself, which houses a relatively variable spectrum of ideological positions, while also entailing an economic perspective that tolerates epistemological and methodological variations (MADRA; ADAMAN, 2014, p. 711). Put another way, under the aegis of neoliberalism it would be possible for governments of different and even conflicting persuasions to exist.

If, on the one hand, the depoliticization of society produced by neoliberalism strengthens the thesis that this worldview leads to the weakening of Western democracies (MARCOS, 2018), on the other, the assumption of neoliberalism as political horizon capable of accommodating different political-ideological positions would undermine our thesis that neoliberal culture is a fertile ground for obscurantism. After all, neoliberal economic policies have

been adopted by extreme right-wing governments such as the Chilean dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, self-proclaimed governments of the center and also by governments of parties considered to be leftist, as happened with several so-called socialist governments in Western Europe. It so happens that the adoption of neoliberal economic policies by left-wing parties is not something that has occurred without profound negative consequences for the very identity of these parties and for the political-cultural configuration of their countries. We could even go as far as to say that the broader social consequences of these left-wing governments adopting neoliberal economic policies have demonstrated that neoliberalism is not ideologically neutral and its adoption in the economic field tends to produce strongly regressive objectivities and subjectivities regarding the dignity of human life.

With regard to depoliticization as one of the consequences of neoliberal economic policies, it is important to point out that this is a phenomenon that affects society in an extensive way, starting with party politics itself, which has become increasingly mediatized, devoid of discussions about the structural problems of capitalist society and also lacking any confrontation with possible alternatives for social order. The differences between the parties on the right and on the left are directed more to aspects of the socio-cultural superstructure than to the question of the economic base, since this is seen as a technical dimension to be dealt with by specialists. This autonomization of the economic sphere is nonetheless strengthened, not necessarily intentionally, by aspects of some movements defending the rights of social groups subjected to oppressive relations which, in seeking to emphasize the need to confront and overcome exclusionary and discriminatory cultural processes, sometimes lose sight of the relations between these problems and the economic dynamics of contemporary capitalism. Paradoxically, the effort not to reduce cultural phenomena to a unilateral and mechanistic determination by economic forces ends up separating the cultural sphere from the economic sphere, contributing to the autonomization of the latter and, consequently, to an even greater power of determination of the entire sociocultural superstructure by the logic of capital.

In addition to the depoliticization of party politics, there has been the depoliticization of trade union organizations associated with a loss of rights and increased insecurity among workers due to both neoliberal government policies and fierce competition for fewer jobs. The deepening of social inequalities, which can be seen in one of its forms through the brutal concentration of income at a global and national level, makes social life a bitter 'survival first' struggle that pits each person against the other, and when an individual manages to rise above the poverty line, the struggle shifts to the pursuit of economic success that places him or her at an apparently safe distance from the frightening lower limit.

In neoliberal theory, this process involving society's economization is connected to the principle that the market is the engine of social evolution, the most effective mechanism for satisfying human needs and the most complex means of communication spontaneously emerging in economic practice. One of the main sources for this theory is the book *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (HAYEK, 2013), whose first edition was in 1982, comprising three previously published books by Hayek: *Rules and Order*, from 1973, *The Mirage of Social Justice*, from 1976 and *The Political Order of a Free People*, from 1979.

Chapter 10 of *Law, Legislation and Liberty* contains an analysis of market order (HAYEK, 2013, pp. 267-290). The author begins the chapter by affirming that the imprecise use of the term economy leads to a series of errors. This imprecise use would basically consist of indistinctly applying the term economy both to individually considered ventures and to the set of economic relations of one country or various countries. Hayek therefore prefers to reserve the term economy, in the singular, for the first case, signifying "a complex of activities by which a given set of means is allocated in accordance with a unitary plan among the competing ends according to their relative importance" (HAYEK, 2013, p. 268).

In other words, economy is the process through which entrepreneurs invest in the allocation of specific means of production, including the work of other people, with a view to the production of specific types of goods (merchandise) whose sale is profitable. It is therefore a process involving subjects with concretely defined needs and the production of goods with particular characteristics. To produce shoes means producing a type of consumer good that satisfies certain needs of individuals other than those that would be satisfied by the production of firearms. The difference, according to Hayek, between economic activity - with these concrete and contextualized characteristics - and the economy of society as a whole, lies in the fact that the latter cannot be directed by concrete purposes, or value choices on what to produce and how much to produce. The economy of a society must, according to this thinker, be commanded by universal abstract rules that allow for the free movement of economic agents based on the spontaneous, impersonal and neutral dynamics of the market. The decision to produce shoes or firearms will be made exclusively on the basis of an assessment of the market by investors. For Hayek, the economic dynamics of society as a whole must be neutral in relation to the concrete purposes:

What is commonly called a social or national economy is in this sense not a single economy but a network of many interlaced economies. Its order shares, as we shall see, with the order of an economy proper some formal characteristics but not the most important one: its activities are not governed by a single scale or hierarchy of ends. The belief that the economic activities of the individual members of society are or ought to be part of one economy in the strict sense of this term, and that what is commonly described as the economy of a country or a society ought to be ordered and judged by the same criteria as an economy proper, is a chief source of error in this field. But, whenever we speak of the economy of a country, or of the world, we are employing a term which suggests that these systems ought to be run on socialist lines and directed according to a single plan so as to serve a unitary system of ends. While an economy proper is an organization in the technical sense in which we have defined that term, that is, a deliberate arrangement of the use of the means which are known to some single agency, the cosmos of the market neither is nor could be governed by such a single scale of ends; it

serves the multiplicity of separate and incommensurable ends of all its separate members. (HAYEK, 2013, p. 268).

This "cosmos of the market" would be the most successful form of confluence between the interests that drive the production of goods and the interests of those who consume the goods produced.

It is necessary now to examine more fully the special attributes possessed by the order of the market and the nature of the benefits we owe to it. This order serves our ends not merely, as all order does, by guiding us in our actions and by bringing about a certain correspondence between the expectations of the different persons, but also, in a sense which we must now make more precise, by increasing the prospects or chances of every one of a greater command over the various goods (i.e. commodities and services) than we are able to secure in any other way. We shall see, however, that this manner of co-ordinating individual actions will secure a high degree of coincidence of expectations and an effective utilization of the knowledge and skills of the several members only at the price of a constant disappointment of some expectations (HAYEK, 2013, p. 267)

In this theory, let us not underestimate the importance of the assertion that the constant disappointment of some expectations is the price to be paid to the market for it to coordinate individual actions in a way that guarantees "a high degree of coincidence of expectations and an effective utilization of the knowledge and skills of the several members" of society. Nor should we forget that this kind of affirmation is part of the reasoning of a book in which the author condemns the notion of social justice or distributive justice on the grounds that it is one of the most harmful beliefs of the twentieth century:

Yet it is the general belief in the validity of the concept of 'social justice' which drives all contemporary societies into greater and greater efforts of the second kind and which has a peculiar self-accelerating tendency: the more dependent the position of the individuals or groups is seen to become on the actions of government, the more they will insist that the governments aim at some recognizable scheme of distributive justice; and the more governments try to realize some preconceived pattern of desirable distribution, the more they must subject the position of the different individuals and groups to their control. So long as the belief in 'social justice' governs political action, this process must progressively approach nearer and nearer to a totalitarian system. (HAYEK, 2013, p. 232)

This explains why we must accept that the frustration of expectations is the price to pay for the superiority of the market as driving principle of social development and individual freedom. Any state initiative to combat social inequalities, improve income distribution, reduce poverty, enable more equitable access to goods and services, will result in "totalitarian" regimes, i.e., a

decrease and, ultimately, absence of individual freedom. But there are at least two embarrassing questions not formulated in this chapter of Hayek's book. Who should resign themselves to paying the market the price of their expectations being permanently frustrated? The answer is evident: those who benefit from distributive justice, that is, the unemployed, the excluded and those who have to submit to the maximum exploitation of their work capacity in exchange for a minimum wage to ensure their survival. And who will have their individual freedom assured by the market? The answer is also obvious: those who possess enough wealth not to run the risk of losing the comfortable material situation in which they live.

And what is Hayek's explanation for the fact that he considers the market to be the most efficient social system of production and access to goods and services, as well as the best way to make the disparate interests that drive the actions of individuals coincide? The answer seems to lie in the limited human capacity to know reality. We should submit ourselves to the market because we are not capable of knowing social reality as a whole. The complexity resulting from the totality of individual actions is thus beyond our capacity for knowledge and understanding and, therefore, if we try to control what we cannot know, the result will be catastrophic in economic terms and authoritarian in political terms. The wisest attitude, from this perspective, would be to organize society in such a way as to eliminate as much as possible the obstacles to the spontaneous functioning of the market. Here it is necessary to understand the distinction Hayek makes between a deliberately made order and an order resulting from spontaneous transformations.

The made order which we have already referred to as an exogenous order or an arrangement may again be described as a construction, an artificial order or, especially where we have to deal with a directed social order, as an organization. The grown order, on the other hand, which we have referred to as a self-generating or endogenous order, is in English most conveniently described as a spontaneous order. Classical Greek was more fortunate in possessing distinct single words for the two kinds of order, namely taxis for a made order, such as, for example, an order of battle, and kosmos for a grown order, meaning originally 'a right order in a state or a community'. We shall occasionally avail ourselves of these Greek words as technical terms to describe the two kinds of order. (HAYEK, 2013, p. 36)

The market is a spontaneous order and, in relation to this type of order, the author argues that it possesses a degree of complexity so high that it could never result from a project constructed by the human mind:

Since a spontaneous order results from the individual elements adapting themselves to circumstances which directly affect only some of them, and which in their totality need not be known to anyone, it may extend to circumstances so complex that no mind can comprehend them all. Consequently, the concept becomes particularly important when we turn from mechanical

to such 'more highly organized' or essentially complex phenomena as we encounter in the realms of life, mind and society. Here we have to deal with 'grown' structures with a degree of complexity which they have assumed and could assume only because they were produced by spontaneous ordering forces. (HAYEK, 2013, p. 39)

He argues that human beings must be cautious in relation to the spontaneous orders resulting from human actions, since our inability to comprehend the complexity of the interactions between the many elements that compose this type of order mean that our attempts at intervening in its workings cause disturbances with consequences that can be quite negative.

In consequence, the degree of power of control over the extended and more complex order will be much smaller than that which we could exercise over a made order or *taxis*. There will be many aspects of it over which we will possess no control at all, or which at least we shall not be able to alter without interfering with - and to that extent impeding - the forces producing the spontaneous order. Any desire we may have concerning the particular position of individual elements, or the relation between particular individuals or groups, could not be satisfied without upsetting the overall order. (HAYEK, 2013, p. 40)

The message is clear: let us not be reckless and foolish trying to change what has formed by itself and goes far beyond the limits of our capacity for comprehension. And it is not simply a matter of humanity not yet possessing enough knowledge to steer the way society is structured and functions in a conscious and organized way. Hayek considers this kind of knowledge impossible and therefore any attempt to intervene in spontaneous orders, particularly those of the market, will always be unfeasible and dangerous. He does not deny that it is possible to act in favor of the development of the spontaneous order, but he believes that these actions should focus on the abstract forms of the working dynamics of these orders from a theoretical knowledge of their abstract forms. But it is not a question of trying to direct this development, but only of driving the spontaneous dynamics. In the case of society as a spontaneous order, people will continue to act and be moved by particular purposes and also particular knowledge, without needing to know how society as a whole moves. We would add that this vision also considers that it is not necessary to successful social actions for people to worry about the direction in which society is moving. In other words, people should trust that the market will bring the total result of human actions to the best possible conclusion, and should trust the economists who master the abstract forms of market movement and who adopt economic policies that favor the free functioning of spontaneous dynamics, assuming of course that these economists do not try to favor some specific sector of society.

It is not difficult to notice a great similarity between neoliberal theory and religious views of the world and life. In the doctrine of neoliberalism there are forces and beings whose powers exceed human capacities and cannot be

understood in all their complexity (the market, and capital). But a caste of society (the economists) can be trained in such a way as to master languages and rituals that allow probing, intuition, and prediction of what is to happen from the movements of these forces or beings. Continuing with the analogy of religious practices, there are sacrifices that can be made in order to exert some influence on market movements. These sacrifices are in the field of what Hayek called "constant disappointment of some expectations", and historical experience shows that, most of the time, workers, the unemployed and those totally excluded from the benefits of free market society are offered in sacrifice at economic altars. Also according to neoliberal doctrine, instead of simply accepting that this kind of disappointment will come to pass, rulers can keep one step ahead and, for example, reduce workers' rights, make cuts to social programs, privatize or dismantle public institutions, so as to please market forces and, in this way, try to minimize economic crises. In practice, these measures almost never ease or prevent crises, but they ensure that large investors do not suffer significant shocks to their economic power and standard of living.

Both in practical-material terms and in terms of adaptation to more disseminated worldviews, there is a utilitarian order to the type of knowledge necessary to the common citizen's struggle not to belong to the sizeable contingent made up of the so-called losers, but rather the small portion of winners. It does not matter that the most accepted worldviews are full of false ideas, prejudices, petty and selfish values or deeply disrespectful notions towards most of humanity, as long as all this integrates a cultural universe in which the individual can transit with ease and, in this way, achieve his/her personal goals. This is undoubtedly an excellent fertilizer for the cultivation of obscurantism, since it spreads through all dimensions of human practice and life not only a fierce spirit of competition, but also an absence of ethical questions about the means employed to leave competitors behind.

One of the ways in which the logic of competition has been incorporated into the production of knowledge in Brazilian public institutions of higher learning has been through academic productivism, whose connections with neoliberalism will be analyzed in the next item, and where we will also present our arguments in favor of the idea that productivism has functioned as a Trojan horse that helps open the gates of higher education institutions to the entry of obscurantism.

2. Academic productivism, neoliberalism and obscurantism

Firstly, it is worth noting we are not claiming that obscurantism has the same characteristics and strength in institutions of higher learning as it has in other spaces of contemporary Brazilian society. The clashes between Abraham Weintraub and Brazilian public universities were a clear demonstration that the institutions of knowledge production in our country are one of the preferred targets of obscurantism's advocates. But it would be naïve to assume that universities and third level institutes are immune to the penetration of retrograde ideologies. Any public institution, including educational establishments of all levels, is subject to the ideological clashes that exist in society as a whole. Some institutions may be more inclined to reproduce the conservative views of

society, while others may exhibit a relative tendency to harbor more progressive and conflicting currents of thought on the status quo. But these institutions do not fail to reproduce the historical changes in the national and regional ideological panorama, nor do they constitute homogeneous environments in terms of the ideas that circulate within them, whereby there is always, to a greater or lesser degree, a not necessarily harmonious or pacific coexistence between different world conceptions.

The fact that Brazilian public universities are institutions for the production and dissemination of knowledge, as well as for the development of researchers and lecturers, places them in opposition to obscurantism, which is extremely hostile to scientific thought, especially when it collides with the mystifications and irrationalism that characterize obscurantist culture. However, the very history of the relations between science and capitalism shows how much economic logic can put the production of knowledge at the service of irrationality, dehumanization and the destruction of life. One of the ways in which the production of knowledge can connect to retrograde, irrational, and destructive economic, political, and cultural agendas is by subjecting the work of researchers to processes that make it as difficult as possible to reflect on the social and historical meaning of the knowledge being produced. The intensification of academic teaching, the fragmentation of the products of research activities, the demands of academic productivity to obtain financial resources, the subordination of investigative activity to immediate economic demands, the shortening of the time to develop researchers, hyper-specialization, the overlapping of evaluation processes for the work of the lecturer-researcher and the constant change of assessment criteria are some of the elements of a situation that makes the university lecturer a cog in a machine that cannot stop.

Productivity is not the same as production. Productivity involves quantitative relationships between inputs (usually translated into financial values) and products in a given time period. By this logic, the individual who produces something, but does not do so within the quantitative relationship stipulated as the desired productivity parameter, will be deemed unproductive.

In the 21st century, the extraction of surplus value continues to be the driving force of transformations in the labor world which, connected to the advance of the regime of financial capital's predominance, have triggered a series of changes in social practice at all levels and, therefore, also in teaching, research and extension activities at universities. In other words, the public university has become part of a growing movement of precariousness, fragmentation and complexity of labor. This process manifests itself in high rates of unemployment, informal employment without the guarantee of labor and social security rights, degrading working conditions, low wages, temporary and outsourced contracts, and health problems expressed in various forms of illness. In the universe of this contemporary sociability, capital and its laws increasingly need differentiated forms of labor, preferably outsourced and intensified in its forms and techniques (ANTUNES, 2009).

In public universities, these changes in the world of work are linked to the dismantling of public services, resulting in a deterioration in the institutional conditions for teaching, a loosening and watering down of labor contracts, an intensification of pace and increased variety of tasks related to teaching,

research and university extension. When President Lula's second term was still in effect, educational researchers from the left had already expressed their concerns about the direction of public policies for higher learning:

The university - not without the opposition of social, political and union movements and intellectuals who still resist - is being transformed into an institution under the guardianship of capital and the State, with the market as mediator. Mercantile rationality has become the core of politics, with severe consequences for popular democratic government - which is increasingly straying from its origin -, for more critical intellectual thinking, for left-wing parties, for research on public higher education policies, but above all for the activities and training of professors-researchers in public state universities (SGUISSARDI; SILVA JUNIOR, 2009, p. 61-62).

The neoliberal project of society has attacked the historical sense of public educational institutions, among them schools and universities. The meaning of these institutions began to be questioned under the pretext of the need to review their role in meeting social demands. University practices were mostly reoriented by the logic of market rationality, which materialized in public-private partnerships established in Brazil after the 1995 Reform of the State apparatus, but which is restructured under new forms of control at each capital crisis. In this scenario, large private corporations in the field of education began to take on an ever greater role in defining public policies for education guided by the interests of financial market investor groups. The crises are used as justification for measures to deepen attacks on workers' rights and public services. Labor reform in the Temer government and social security reform in the Bolsonaro government are the result of a policy that is devastating for workers in general and impacts teachers at all levels of education in no less damaging ways.

The *modus operandi* resulting from competitive practices in the forms of labor organization in public universities has exacerbated some of the principles of the neoliberal model's rationale, namely: individualism, competition and meritocracy. The neoliberal offensive against public services and the public university has taken on an even more violent profile with Jair Bolsonaro as president and Olavo de Carvalho as the ideological mentor to most members of that government. Neither misses an opportunity to attack the knowledge produced and socialized in universities through the work of professors, researchers, undergraduate and graduate students.

Academic productivism, an expression coined to designate mercantile rationality in public universities, has become a hegemonic social practice in institutions of higher learning, causing individuals, research groups, and universities to assume competition as the driving principle of work involving knowledge. The official research funding agencies in Brazil (Capes, CNPq and state foundations) embraced academic productivism as a decisive criterion for research funding. Universities, in turn, have incorporated this same criterion into the evaluation processes of lecturers and students on graduate programs. Even when not directly submitted to the interests of private initiative, the production of

knowledge in universities ended up surrendering to the model of productive dynamics developed in neoliberal capitalism.

This academic environment, dominated by neoliberal productivist logic, produced an apparent depoliticization of university practices, a process that, when analyzed in greater depth, shows itself to be a neoliberal politicization with the propensity for tolerance of obscurantist ideas and attitudes or, worse still, a favorable disposition towards them.

It is clear that obscurantist ideas and attitudes come to university in several ways and via the various agents that act in the institution: professors, students and employees. In this sense, it would be a mistake to consider that academic productivism as a contemporary way of configuring academic work is the only element favoring the infiltration of obscurantism in the university environment. An example of another form that manifests obscurantism in higher education is that of people adhering to the ideas of the *Escola sem Partido* (Non-Partisan Schools) movement which engages in denunciations of teachers who are alleged to be practicing political indoctrination in the classroom. But it has also been an increasingly frequent phenomenon for people who are indoctrinated in certain aspects of Christianity to denounce university professors for working with scientific, philosophical or artistic content that is in conflict with various religious dogmas and interpretations of the Bible.

The simple fact that certain didactic activities in higher education are characterized as an invitation to think in a rational and objective way about issues concerning natural and social history and contemporary social relations, often becomes an event that triggers strong defensive emotional reactions fed by cultures that see in the academic debate the risk of seduction by malign forces. This kind of situation, although not created by the phenomenon of academic productivism, is more easily reproduced in a university environment where almost everyone is more concerned with productivity rates than with the type of intellectual environment being cultivated in university life. The mercantile logic, which ends up formatting all the dynamics and practices of the university institution, tends to create an unfavorable attitude to spending time on activities considered unproductive. Added to this is the fact that the predominant educational orientation in the curricula of the undergraduate courses is competency-based learning (RAMOS, 2001), whose main vector is a spirit of adaptation to social changes almost never challenged.

At the time of writing this article, the steering of university practices by neoliberal sociability is drastically accentuated in the form of strong pressure on universities to adopt distance learning, renamed remote teaching. Claims that this is a temporarily adopted strategy, owing to social isolation as a means of slowing down the spread of the COVID-19 virus, are not very convincing because they are accompanied by a rhetoric of modernization, adoption of active methodologies, etc., which cannot disguise the enthusiasm for what appears to be a long-term project. If the adoption of such a project is confirmed, the result will be the accentuation of a pragmatic and superficial character of the educational relationship between professors, students and knowledge. The tendency will be to retreat from a higher education perspective of developing intellectuals who position themselves on the social reality of which they are a part. From the point of view of the teaching activity, the mental resources of professors and students ultimately focus more on the means (the technological

tools) than on the ends (the educational goals themselves). The maxim of McLuhan (2013, p. 16) is thus fulfilled, "*the medium is the message*" which he used as the title of the first chapter in his book *Understanding Media: the extensions of man*, first published in 1964. The reification of digital information and communication technologies further advances the process of the neoliberal worldview's domination of higher level education, thereby removing most of the obstacles to the spread of obscurantism in an environment that, as a place of knowledge production and dissemination, would at first appear quite hostile to it.

Closing thoughts

As long as there is history, no sociocultural configuration is insurmountable. We are experiencing a global and national moment of many defeats for those who defend the need to surpass the current form of social organization commanded by capital. More than that, it is a historical moment of many defeats for all those who defend the dignity of human life. The phenomenon of Bolsonarism is a clear expression of the advance of barbarism, which is a consequence of the serious problems that capitalism has created or aggravated in recent decades and does not show any capacity or interest in solving. This phenomenon has a very significant destructive potential and, as far as education is concerned, this potential is lethal. Our understanding is that the fight against Bolsonarism and obscurantism requires us to comprehend its non-accidental relations with neoliberalism. Brazilian public higher education needs to realize that the attempt to adapt to the demands of academic productivism will not guarantee the survival of the public university. This attempt, by disseminating a competitive university culture that adheres to market logic, may end up reproducing the ingenuity of the Trojans who accepted the gift of the Greeks as a peaceful gesture and, with it, allowed the enemy to invade their city and totally destroy it. It remains to be seen if there is still time and if we will have the necessary strength and will to react in the opposite direction to the destruction of the public university by obscurantist neoliberalism.

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This text was translated from the original Portuguese by Tony O'Sullivan.

Contribution of the authors:

Author 1: Substantial contribution to conceiving the argument and defining the line of analysis. Main author responsible for the article's composition.

Author 2: Substantial contribution to conceiving the argument and defining the line of analysis. Collaboration in the article's composition and active participation in the final revision of the article.

Author 3: Substantial contribution to conceiving the argument and defining the line of analysis. Collaboration in the article's composition and active participation in the final revision of the article.

Sent on: 12/July/2020 | Approved on: 13/July/2020