

# Covid-19 and disaster capitalism: “*Passando a boiada*” in the Brazilian meat processing chain

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## Abstract

The article discusses the social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the meat processing industry in southern Brazil. Based on the notion of *disaster capitalism*, we examine how political and corporate agents have taken advantage of the health catastrophe to create a privileged space for simplifications and deregulation in this sector. According to our reasoning, they accelerate precarious work in the meat industry and amplify the harmful effects of agribusiness on local ecologies and global ecosystems. In light of this, we also emphasize the analytical potential that results from the intersection between the categories of *syndemics* and *structural violence* to displace the traditional analyses of risk groups and behaviors in highlighting environments and their agents.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Meat processing industry; Disaster capitalism; Syndemics; Brazil.

# A Covid-19 e o capitalismo de desastre: “Passando a boiada” na indústria de processamento de carne no Brasil

## Resumo

O trabalho discute os impactos sociais da pandemia de Covid-19 na indústria de processamento de carne no sul do Brasil. A partir da noção de *capitalismo de desastre*, examinaremos o modo como agentes políticos e corporativos têm tirado proveito da catástrofe sanitária para constituição de um espaço privilegiado para simplificações e desregulações neste setor. Em nosso argumento, elas aceleram a precarização do trabalho na indústria da carne e amplificam os efeitos nefastos do agronegócio sobre as ecologias locais e os ecossistemas globais. Face a isto, destacaremos ainda o potencial analítico que resulta da intersecção entre as categorias de *sindemia* e *violência estrutural*, como forma de deslocar as tradicionais análises de grupos e de comportamentos de risco para colocar em relevo os seus ambientes e os seus agentes.

**Palavras-chave:** Covid-19; Indústria de processamento de carne; Capitalismo de desastre; Sindemia; Brasil.

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The recording of a ministerial meeting made public in May 2020 exposed the intricacies of the destructive policy underway in Brazil, led by agents of the federal government.<sup>1</sup> In an emblematic scene, the then Minister of the Environment, Ricardo Salles, praised the opportunity to “pass the infra-legal reforms of deregulation” and “simplification,” which “the whole world demands,” while the press turned its attention to pandemic. In his words:

So, to do this we need to make an effort here while we are in this moment of tranquility in terms of press coverage, because they’re only talking about COVID, and *get on with “passando a boiada” and changing all the regulations and simplifying norms.* From IPHAN, from the Ministry of Agriculture, from the Ministry of Environment, from the Ministry of This, from the Ministry of That. Now *it’s time to join forces to push through simplification*, it’s regulation that we need, in all aspects (Salles, 2020: 19-29, emphasis added).

The expression “*passando a boiada*” [pushing through further deregulation]<sup>2</sup> – evoked by the minister in the form of facilitating a deregulation project that tends to favor corporations over populations in the midst of a global health catastrophe – echoes the operational complex of *disaster capitalism*. This concept, put forward by Naomi Klein (2008), concerns the way in which contemporary capitalism uses self-engendered crises as opportunities for its facilitation and expansion. In its soft form, disaster capitalism offers corporate solutions to systemic risks, such as carbon credit markets to mitigate the effects of global warming or actuarial interests, which valorize life in the face of imminent health crises (Fletcher, 2012; Lakoff, 2017), while in its hard form, it manifests as that which Klein (2008) calls the “shock doctrine.” This concerns exploiting crises and disruptive events to implement otherwise unpopular measures, drawing on the context of chaos and disorientation in which citizens are immersed. In this respect, the doctrine represents the most advanced chapter of the *neoliberal offensive* against structures that aim to protect society from the satanic mill of absolute free competition, such as labor, environmental and tax regulations (Polanyi, 1985).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The ministerial meeting took place on April 22, 2020, and the recording was made public on May 22 of the same year by a Supreme Federal Court ruling (Brasil 2020a). At the time, it became the center of attention due to the resignation of then Minister of Justice and Public Security, Sérgio Moro, on April 24, 2020. At the press conference where he announced his departure from the government, the former judge stated that the reason for his decision could be found in this material – namely, that he had been pressured by the president to make changes in the command of the Federal Police – which is why the release of the recording’s content was subject to the remit of the law. See more in: “*Sergio Moro acusa Bolsonaro...*” [Sergio Moro accuses Bolsonaro...], 2020; “*Ex-ministro Sérgio Moro...*” [Former Minister Sérgio Moro...], 2020 and “*Celso de Mello retira sigilo de vídeo...*” [Celso de Mello removes confidentiality of video...], 2020. However, besides being the alleged reasons for Moro’s departure from the government, the recording showed a frank debate in which several ministers were outspoken concerning projects and criticisms that openly confronted the constitutionality of a democratic rule of law. The discourse of Minister Ricardo Salles forges an example of this. See “*Ministro do Meio Ambiente*” [Minister of the Environment], 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Though the idiom is translated here as “pushing through further deregulation,” its literal expression in Brazil means “setting the cattle loose” – a metaphor about enabling the breaking of rules that alludes to opening gates that let animals escape from a farm.

<sup>3</sup> As Chamayou (2018) well notes, since the 1970s, this counteroffensive has gained discursive characters increasingly anchored in strategic-military logic. Thus, in parallel with Boltanski and Chiapello’s “new spirit of capitalism” (2009), on flexibility and entrepreneurship, a normativity of war, attack and defense is in force – “a new front on which to mobilize” (Chamayou 2018: 26).

Following the idea of *disaster capitalism*, we begin to ask ourselves how “simplification” (often translated by the word flexibilization) and “infra-legal reforms” – so valued by Ricardo Salles at the ministerial meeting – have increased the vulnerability of certain populations during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> To highlight the pertinence of the issue, we analyze the situation of the meat processing industry in southern Brazil. Here, it is understood as one of the sectors where “*a boiada está passando*” [the cattle are being set loose; deregulation is ongoing]. This process has taken advantage of the pandemic to constitute a privileged space for deregulation that further accelerates the precariousness of work in this sector.

Accidents and occupational illnesses have already provided strong evidence of the unhealthy conditions in the meat processing industry, but the high COVID-19 rates among the workers show how much the meat chain favors the circulation of, exposure to, and contamination by the virus. On a broader plane, the very emergence of new pathogens comes into play in this field, considering the disastrous effects of agribusiness on local ecologies and global ecosystems. Regarding this topic, we also follow the suggestion of Singer and Rylko-Bauer (2021) to examine the impacts of the pandemic on different social groups based on the concepts of *syndemics* and *structural violence*.

Singer and Rylko-Bauer (2021) understand *syndemics* to be the adverse synergistic interaction between two or more diseases or debilitating conditions, promoted or facilitated by social and environmental conditions. Regarding *structural violence*, in the wake of Farmer (2004), they refer to this as “the often-hidden ways that structures of inequality, such as poverty, racism, and discrimination, negatively impact the lives and well-being of affected populations” (Singer & Rylko-Bauer, 2021: 8). In more precise terms, what interests us is how the intersection between syndemics and structural violence displaces the traditional analyses of “groups at risk and risky behaviors” to highlight “environments of risk and agents promoting risk” (Singer & Rylko-Bauer, 2021: 9; Nichter, 2008). According to our reasoning, the meat processing industry is one of many environments of risk where politicians who want to *passar a boiada* are some of the most prominent agents.

## The triumph of neoliberal flesh

The turmoil arising from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international trade does not seem to have unsettled the Brazilian meat processing industry. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2021), 7.31 million heads of cattle, 12.50 million swine and 1.55 billion chickens were slaughtered in Brazil in the last quarter of 2020 alone. Animal protein (processed and *in natura*) continued to represent a considerable share of Brazilian exports, particularly to China. China absorbed more than half of the beef and swine production – respectively, 56.8% and 58.3% of the total for each sector – and just over 16% of the poultry production during this period (IBGE, 2021).

The backdrop to the impressive figures for this Brazilian industry and its trade is the existence of one of the largest herds on the planet. It is composed of around 200 million cattle, in addition to huge chicken and swine stocks slaughtered, processed and packaged daily by more than half a million workers who labor in thousands of cold storage plants distributed throughout the country. Overall, in a year marked by a 4.1% decline in the gross domestic product, the agricultural sector was the only one to register some growth (2%) in Brazil. This situation has reinforced the grandiloquent narrative cultivated by the employer class, that agribusiness is the rock that sustains the country’s development, even in times of a profound global health crisis.

4 This topic is developed by us within the scope of the project “A Covid-19 no Brasil: análise e resposta aos impactos sociais da pandemia entre profissionais de saúde e população em isolamento” [Covid-19 in Brazil: analysis and response to the social impacts of the pandemic among health professionals and the population in isolation] (Contract ref.: 0464/20 FINEP/UFRGS). Financed by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MCTI), the research is developed by the Rede Covid-19 Humanidades MCTI [MCTI Covid-19 Humanities Network] and forms part of a set of actions by the Rede Vírus MCTI [MCTI Virus Network] to fight the pandemic.

Several factors contributed to the good results of Brazilian agribusiness during the first year of the pandemic. Twenty days after the state decree of public calamity by Congress (Brasil, 2020b), the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply (MAPA) published an ordinance that defined practically all links in the food production chain as “essential services” (Brasil, 2020c). This shielded the primary sector from many of the restrictions on the movement of people and goods that affected other niches in the economy, especially that of services. Likewise, the accelerated resumption of consumption in China, beginning in the second half of the year, also helped agribusiness to present better results than the rest of the Brazilian economy. The meat sector, in particular, had already shown the benefits of trade with China since the second half of 2018, when an outbreak of African Swine Fever decimated a large part of its herd. According to the IBGE (2021), China increased the volume of pork purchased from the Brazilian meat packing industry by 52% in the comparison with the final quarters of 2019 and 2020. In some aspects, the pandemic has even been perceived as a favorable business context for Brazilian agribusiness – a crisis transformed into an opportunity. In this regard, in April 2020, a report by the international consultancy PricewaterhouseCoopers indicated that:

Up to now, Brazilian agribusiness has been overcoming the challenges that social isolation imposes on food supply. While important food exporting countries restricted their shipments to guarantee the internal supply of these products and other countries suffered from the lack of labor to produce food, Brazil presented a 13.3% increase in the exported value of agricultural *commodities* in March 2020 compared to March 2019, positioning itself as a reliable food supplier (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020: 13).

However, in parallel with the apparent resilience of agribusiness to the context of the pandemic, its workers have suffered from recurrent outbreaks of contamination by the novel coronavirus in Brazilian meat plants. This situation is especially critical in the three states of the southern region – Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul – where most of the plants dedicated to the slaughter and processing of farm animals (pig and poultry) are concentrated.<sup>5</sup> As Segata et al. (2021: 99) reported, in Rio Grande do Sul alone “there were 5,804 confirmed cases of COVID-19 among workers in the meat processing sector in the first six months of the pandemic between March and September, 2020,” which initially led to the suspension of activities for several establishments in the sector.<sup>6</sup>

The issue is that the SARS-CoV-2 arrived in Brazil through international air travel and initially spread in large metropolitan centers. Thus, the high prevalence of contagion in meat processing sector suggests not only that this one of the main sectors responsible for internalization of the virus and the disease in the country, but also for its dissemination in indigenous communities in the three southern states, given the large number of indigenous people hired by meat processing plants (Brasil, 2020d; Granada et al., 2021; Heck et al., 2020; Ripplinger et al., 2020; Segata et al., 2021). Indeed, the COVID-19 outbreaks that also occurred in British, German and North American refrigeration plants throughout 2020 indicate that there is a strong correlation or material proximity (Brown & Kelly, 2014) between the way in which these productive structures function and the conditions favorable for dissemination of the novel coronavirus. In this regard, a report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the United States, from July 2020, affirms that:

<sup>5</sup> For this reason, in the framework of socioenvironmental ethics, Florit et al. (2019) characterize these territories as “regions of intensive speciesism.”

<sup>6</sup> In March 2021, after a year of pandemic, the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 among workers in the slaughterhouse sector in Rio Grande do Sul had reached 7,993, according to surveys published on the site *Boletim Epidemiológico (Análises sobre os casos de Síndromes Respiratórias Agudas Graves - SRAG do Rio Grande do Sul)* [Epidemiological Bulletin (Analyses of cases of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome – SARS in Rio Grande do Sul)]. Available at: <https://coronavirus.rs.gov.br/informe-epidemiologico>. Accessed continually, the last time on April 9, 2021.

Distinctive factors that increase meat and poultry processing workers' risk for exposure to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, include prolonged close workplace contact with coworkers (within 6 feet [2 m] for  $\geq 15$  minutes) for long time periods (8-12-hour shifts), shared work spaces, shared transportation to and from the workplace, congregate housing, and frequent community contact with fellow workers. Many of these factors might also contribute to ongoing community transmission. (Waltenburg et al., 2020: 887)

However, the rapid escalation of COVID-19 cases in North American meat packing plants and the protests from within the industry against the shutdown of its production units led the Trump government to make use of the Defense Production Act. This is an exceptional legislation for times of war, in this case, triggered to keep meat packing plants open and operating. In Brazil, since the beginning of the pandemic, employers like the *Associação Brasileira de Proteína Animal* (ABPA) [Brazilian Association of Animal Protein] and the *Associação Brasileira das Indústrias Exportadoras de Carne* (ABIEC) [Brazilian Association of Meat Exporting Industries]<sup>7</sup> have manifested against the sanitary ban on meat processing plants, raising fears of shortages, the escalation of inflation, and social chaos. In a note of repudiation against the closing of two meat packing plants in Rio Grande do Sul, issued in conjunction with other industry associations, the ABPA warned about

the serious risks of imposing actions based on emotional decisions that might be engendered for the entire community and the country, particularly in the current situation of quarantine decreed to fight the COVID-19 epidemic. The stoppage of food production increases the risk of inflation and shortages. Closed units could mean an absence of products in supermarkets. Processes that promote a reduction in the supply of food could lead to social chaos, in the future.<sup>8</sup>

Regarding these apocalyptic warnings, it is worth emphasizing the material and symbolic weight of meat in the Brazilian food code (Sordi, 2016). It has historical roots. On the one hand, it upholds the status of meat as a type of “absolute food” for most modern societies (Fischler, 2001), while on the other, it affirms the centrality of the process of the occupation of Brazilian territory by fronts of agricultural and pastoral expansion. In addition, the theme of inflation, in particular, has determined a large part of the political and economic discussion in Brazil since the late 1970s, marking the entire process of the opening of democracy and the consolidation of the República Nova (Nobre, 2013; Carvalho, 2018). Here, as in other emerging or low-income countries, protein indicates the materialization of social and economic conquest more than food security: the neoliberal triumph, on which governmentality operates based on the reasoning that “meat on the table calms the people” (Lapegna & Otero, 2016).

By evoking the possibility of shortages and scarcity, the large-scale meat industry meddles with fears deeply rooted in the Brazilian imaginary, especially among the less favored sectors of society, for whom the consumption of this food is an indication of well-being and material prosperity.<sup>9</sup> This imaginary leads us to understand why fluctuations in the price of this type of protein and fears regarding its supply have historically operated as a harbinger of social discontent and disruptive political experiences.

7 The ABPA is the main representative of the poultry and swine sector, while the ABIEC convenes the main suppliers in beef production.

8 See “Nota de repúdio...” [Note of repudiation...], 2020.

9 One of the classics of Brazilian cinema from the 1980s, *A Marvada Carne* [lit. The Wicked Meat], by André Klotzel (1985), tells the story of Nhô Quim, a hillbilly figure obsessed with the desire to eat beef. It is a modern, Brazilian variation on the old theme of peasant fixation on meat consumption, analyzed in numerous works on popular culture and food (Cândido, 2010; Fischler, 2001). In addition, *A Marvada Carne* also offers a comical portrayal of the socioeconomic situation in Brazil during that time, squeezed between the structural crisis of the national-developmental model and the lack of inflationary control of the so-called “lost decade,” which eroded the population’s purchasing power. A year after the film’s premiere, the emblematic “hunt for fat cattle” took place, an episode in which then-president José Sarney, in an effort to combat the crisis of shortages caused by the Cruzado Plan, mobilized the Federal Police to apprehend cattle for slaughter and fight alleged “speculators” that retained herds in the countryside to increase the price of the product.

Taking advantage of this symbology, the logic of these companies also reverberates the tone of confrontation adopted by the President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro, who since the beginning of the pandemic has attacked restrictive measures taken by subnational governments based on the argument of imminent economic collapse.<sup>10</sup>

In the day-to-day production, however, it is the non-stop imperative which characterizes the functioning of the meat industry that has taken its toll on the health of workers (Porcher, 2011; Schlosser 2013; Blanchette, 2020). Even prior to the pandemic, the meat chain stood out as one of the economic sectors that most generated occupational illnesses and work accidents, both in Brazil and the rest of the world.

In the United States, the huge impact generated on the American public by the book *The Jungle* (1906), by socialist writer Upton Sinclair (2005), describing the degrading working and sanitary conditions of Chicago meat packers, was decisive for the enactment of the first major act on food safety regulation in the country. This was the case of the Meat Inspection Act, followed by the Pure Food and Drug Act, both sanctioned by Theodore Roosevelt in 1906. Through indignation concerning sanitary irregularities, capitalism entered an era of regulatory agencies and food safety legislation. This process was pioneer in the promotion of veterinary medicine and animal husbandry (and later, food engineering) as essential knowledge for the meat industry, organizing itself in international networks, resulting in what Stull (2017) described as “control of the food system in America” that was replicated around the world. However, this set of measures began to ensure the safety of the food produced in this industry, but not necessarily of its workers.

In a recent ethnography on the American pork processing industry, Alex Blanchette (2020) analyses how the kill lines of meat packing plants shape the human body through painful and repetitive work, especially that of Black people and Latino migrants. It is in this space that the pig body, which has already been converted into a carcass, is dismembered to be transformed into meat cuts and other products. Workers become specialized in dealing with certain parts of the pig carcass, which then shape the traumas that manifest themselves in human bodies. In other words, humans, pigs and capitalism merge on the kill lines, as human workers thus embody the commercial anatomy of pigs and industrial capitalism through the desirable repetitive movements of their production lines (Blanchette, 2020). Moreover, the author shows us how the medical departments that serve the plants in this industry leverage human work through pig animality, as part of the total profitability of this industry.

Medical exams that identify occupational trauma also classify human workers’ bodies into tendons and muscles. In the case he studied, this helped the company make decisions about skills, combining the strengths of human and pig physicalities in the kill and cutting lines. In his words: this process “marks a situation where decades of effort to wring more value from porcine bodies are now doubling back to remake how the human body is marshaled as an industrial site of ‘new money.’” (Blanchette, 2020: 181).

However, the capitalist experience of industrial farms is even broader. It is inserted in a logic beyond confinement and animal domination, creating the need to introject the desirable industrial animality into human and pig bodies. The way in which nature is “neoliberalized,” to use an expression by Wallace (2016), takes place in the desire to incorporate humanity into standardized pig worlds. Misaligned pigs and humans poorly positioned based on their abilities hinder the process of scaled production, which is why the standardization of animals begins with their genes.

The herds are genetically modified and exposed to the same controlled environmental conditions on the farms, with the same food compounds for their nutrition. Thus, they not only become components that fit perfectly to industrial lines, but also fit the preferences of those who consume their bodies converted into meat. It turns out that *standard pigs* are immunosuppressed creatures, and thus an economic risk to the

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, as noted by Schneider et al. (2020), the inflationary pressure on food prices resulting from COVID-19 did not stem from stoppages or a reduction in manufacturing activities, as rumored by the employer class. Rather it stemmed from the very success of Brazilian agribusiness during the period, because of both the increase in internal demand due to domestic confinement and the exchange rate devaluation, in the form of stimulating exports.

industry. Standardization exposes entire herds to potential mass contamination, requiring the administration of high doses of antibiotics so their already short life spans endure until slaughter and they do not succumb to disease beforehand. However, the pig's digestive system does not fully metabolize this complex of drugs and supplements, causing part of these chemicals to be eliminated in their feces and urine.

The meat processing chain is also constituted by digestive ecologies (Blanchette, 2020), landscapes emerging from giant ponds of waste that yield environmental and public health problems. As the author describes, the strong sun causes the liquid part of this manure to evaporate, carrying with it the residual chemical particles that not only affect the human and animal population, but also the soil and plants through rain. These residues lodge directly in their bodies passing through the porous borders of the skin. The dry part of the manure in the ponds turns into dust that scatters on the wind and, through breathing, settles in the lungs of the workers and neighbors of those who are “on the outside” of these corporations (Blanchette, 2019, 2020; Segata et al., 2021).

In Brazil, where the first meat processing plants date back to the beginning of the twentieth century, the organization of work has always been characterized by “the drudgery, intense pace, low temperatures, humidity, inadequate posture, risk of accidents, exposure to biological agents, among others, accumulating numerous risk factors to human health” (Brasil, 2020e). In 2013, data gathered by the NGO Repórter Brasil based on official statistics showed that, compared with other economic segments, meat processing plants generated twice as many head injuries and three times as many injuries to the shoulders and arms of workers (Repórter Brasil, 2013). The meat chain represents the highest prevalence of repetitive strain injuries and work-related musculoskeletal disorders registered in the *Anuário Estatístico da Previdência Social* [Social Security Statistical Yearbook], not counting respiratory conditions aggravated by intermittent exposure to cold and mutilations resulting from the continuous interaction with sharp objects (Brasil, 2017).

It is evident, therefore, that far from being a novelty, COVID-19 intensifies and reiterates a precarious situation that has been prevalent in the sector for several decades on a global scale. Living in environmentally degraded productive landscapes and historically marked by experiences of bodily suffering and systemic illness (Wallace, 2020; Schloesser, 2013), when faced with the novel coronavirus, the experience of meat industry workers in southern Brazil exposes its *syndemic* components; as defined by Singer and Rylko-Bauer (2021: 8) “marrying the concept of ‘synergy’ with ‘epidemic’, a syndemics approach recognizes that diseases in a population occur neither independent of social and ecological conditions, nor in isolation from other diseases.”

Likewise, the reactions of the employer class to the demands for safety at work during the pandemic explain the context of structural violence (Farmer, 2004) in which workers in the meat processing sector are immersed. It is highlighted through processes that lead certain populations to disproportionate degrees of porous contact with potentially contaminating substances and traumatic occupations. Social injustices, environmental degradation and other systemic conditions of illness that form the “silent processes that intersect and embody capitalism and the Anthropocene and their racial, class, and multispecies hierarchies” (Segata et al., 2021: 106).

As we discuss below, a series of political and normative maneuvers that took place throughout 2020 and in the first months of 2021 indicate the adoption by the industry of an approach akin to the shock doctrine of disaster capitalism described by Noemi Klein (2008), that is, taking advantage of situations of great calamity and public commotion to carry out unpopular neoliberal reforms (Chamayou, 2018).

## Trojan horses in the cold room

On March 22, 2020, the Presidency of the Republic published *Medida Provisória* (MP) [Provisional Measure] no. 927, which provided for labor measures to confront the state of public calamity resulting from the novel coronavirus (Brasil, 2020f). Following the rite of Brazilian legislation, the act went to the lower house of Congress for consideration by the representatives, who can include amendments to the original text prior to its transformation into law.<sup>11</sup> Over the following months, several amendments were added by representatives, including a draft proposal by Santa Catarina representative Celso Maldaner, which provided for an amendment to Article 253 of the *Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho* (CLT) [Consolidation of Labor Laws], in force since 1943, which thus rules:

For employees who work inside cold rooms and for those who move goods from a hot or normal environment to a cold one and vice versa, after 1 (one) hour and 40 (forty) minutes of continuous work, a period will be ensured of 20 (twenty) minutes rest, calculating this interval as effective work.

*Sole paragraph* - For the purposes of this article, artificially cold is considered to be whichever is lower, in the first, second and third climatic zones of the official map of the Ministry of Labor, Industry and Commerce, 15°C (fifteen degrees), 12°C (twelve degrees) in the fourth zone, and 10°C (ten degrees) in the fifth, sixth and seventh zones (Brasil, 2020g).

The amendment proposed by the deputy maintained the main section of the article, but modified its paragraphs in order to specify what is understood as a cold room. The proposal used the following wording:

§1 For the purposes of the present article, a cold room is considered to be only an environment with an artificial temperature below 4°C (four degrees), intended for the storage of products;

§2 For the right to breaks provided for in the caput of this article, for the worker who moves goods between a normal or hot environment to an artificially cold environment or vice versa, the following requirements must be met simultaneously:

a. When moving from one environment to another, the temperature must configure variation greater than 10°C (ten degrees);

b. One of the environments must necessarily be artificially cold, considering an artificially cold environment to be whichever is lower, in the first, second and third climate zones of the official map of the Ministry of Labor, Industry and Commerce, 15°C (fifteen degrees), 12°C (twelve degrees) in the fourth zone, and 10°C (ten degrees) in the fifth, sixth and seventh zones (Brasil, 2020h).

As soon as they became aware of the amendment, the *Ministério Público do Trabalho* [Public Prosecutor's Office for Labor Affairs] and the unions realized that this was an insertion in the text of MP 927/2020 from an older bill, authored by Pernambuco representative Silvio Costa, that was presented in 2011 using identical wording, PL 2363/2011 (Brasil, 2011). At the time, the congressman justified the proposal to change Art. 253 of the CLT based on the argument that it was necessary to align its requirements “with the technical knowledge that currently exists, notably on cold tolerance parameters.” Likewise, the justification of the bill argued that the text in force at the time allowed for a very elastic interpretation of what could be considered a “cold room” by the labor courts, causing “legal uncertainty” for companies.

<sup>11</sup> In Brazilian constitutional law, a *Medida Provisória* [Provisional Measure] is an act of the Executive Power with the force of a law, enacted, in principle, without the participation of the legislative power. The legislature is called to discuss and approve it later. Provisional measures can only be enacted in situations of proven urgency or relevance.

In 2013, the publication of *Norma Regulamentadora* [Regulatory Norm] no. 36 of the Ministry of Labor and Employment clarified a series of understandings on the criteria for the inspection of health and safety conditions at work in meat processing plants. A process that at the time momentarily annulled the political conditions for processing bill PL 2363/2011. The advent of the pandemic, however, opened a *window of opportunity* for the meat processing sector to refer to it again, through emergency changes in the CLT promoted by MP 927/2020. In reaction to this movement, the Public Prosecutor's Office for Labor Affairs published a harsh technical note, in which it warned that if the amendment prevailed, "95% of workers in meat processing plants throughout the country would have their fundamental right to health restricted," since:

In poultry, cattle and pig meat processing plants, among others, only the shipping and palletizing sectors have temperatures equal to or less than 4°C (...) and count on workers who move goods (...), sectors that employ less than 5% of the total employees in a meat processing plant (Brasil, 2020e).

In addition, the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office claimed that there was unconstitutionality in the inclusion of matter of foreign content in the original object of the provisional measure, which constituted a clear *Trojan horse* in the legislative proposal. Due to this and other manifestations to the contrary, by the judiciary and civil society, the author of the amendment ended up removing it from the text shortly thereafter. Even so, the attempt triggered a warning among unions that other attacks against the right to temperature-related breaks could be on the horizon from the employer class and their political allies. Thus, the context of the pandemic forced labor representations to act on two political flanks simultaneously: on the one hand, demanding the appropriate measures to contain the COVID-19 outbreaks in the meat plants, on the other, ensuring that previously consolidated rights were not suppressed by the shock strategy being conducted by the employer class.

Concerning the first flank, we have shown above that, since the first cases of COVID-19 were recorded among workers in meat processing plants, employers have sought to avoid stoppages or any reduction in the pace of their activities at any cost. In line with this, a series of sanitary protocols and good practice guides were proposed by employers themselves in an effort to promote "not only workers' health, but the sustainability of the entire chain" (ABPA, 2020: 1). Likewise, the publication of several regulations at the state level led the employer segment to demand some type of overarching regulation from the federal government in order to "unify understandings," "avoid overlaps" and "guarantee legal security" for the functioning of the sector. This demand resulted in the publication of *Portaria Conjunta* [Joint Ordinance] no. 19, of June 18, 2020, signed by the Ministers of Health, Labor, and Agriculture and Livestock (Brasil, 2020i). Analyzing the ordinance, the Prosecutor's Office for Labor Affairs claimed that there were a series of insufficiencies in the proposed measures, which were "less protective than state norms and even other federal norms of health authorities" (Brasil, 2020e: 36).

With regard to the second flank, at the end of 2020, the Ministry of Economy opened a public consultation for the revision of Regulatory Norm no. 36 (Brasil, 2013). Both the unions and the Prosecutor's Office for Labor Affairs consider this standard to be the most important advance in the prevention of accidents and illnesses in the sector, as a result of the efforts carried out by the state and civil society throughout the 1990s and 2000s to improve working conditions in the meat processing industry. Conversely, employers claim that it was necessary to fight "excessive bureaucracy" and "rationalize operating costs" resulting from the adaptation of productive infrastructure to the requirements of the established norm.<sup>12</sup> For them, it is necessary to *passar a bioada* at all costs. Aware of this movement to review and dismantle the legislation that protects them and in the midst of the worst health crisis in the last century, in August 2020, the unions launched the campaign

<sup>12</sup> See "Empresários tentam afrouxar norma..." [Businessmen try to weaken the norm...], 2021.

“A carne mais barata é a do trabalhador” [The cheapest meat is the worker’s flesh], with the objective of sensitizing the population regarding the situation inside meat processing plants.<sup>13</sup>

In March 2021, the revived bill PL 2363/2011, which amends the CLT article on temperature-related breaks, returned to the agenda of the lower house Congressional Committee on Labor, Administration and Public Service, triggering a new wave of reactions from the judiciary and the unions. According to the statement of the *Associação Nacional dos Procuradores do Trabalho* (ANPT) [National Association of Labor Attorneys], on March 26, 2021:

The organization of work in meat processing plants is characterized by an intense rhythm, low temperatures, humidity, inadequate postures, the risk of accidents and exposure to biological agents, among other factors and conditions that are equally painful and unhealthy, which is why the granting of recovery breaks must be the fundamental aim of protecting the physical and mental health of male and female workers.

Continuous work in a cold environment deteriorates muscle components and neural functioning, suggestive of the development of musculoskeletal disorders. Exposure to cold air, moreover, causes inflammatory changes in the airways, compromises respiratory/pulmonary function and precipitates asthma attacks in predisposed individuals.

At a time when Brazil became the global epicenter of the pandemic, the amendment of Art. 253 is flagrantly reckless and, if finalized, will significantly increase the already heightened risk of contamination by COVID-19 to which male and female workers in meat processing plants are exposed.

It should be noted that the modification, however strange to the original motivation and purposes of the respective edition, had already been attempted in the context of Provisional Measure no. 927, which Congress, with propriety, allowed to expire (ANPT, 2021).

In a public hearing held by the State Legislative Assembly of Santa Catarina on the eve of the appraisal of PL 2363/2011 by the lower house Commission on Work, on March 29, 2021, Labor Prosecutor Sandro Eduardo Sardá asserted that “Brazil was at risk of going down in history as the only country that, instead of expanding protection for workers in meat processing plants, is going to regress, even though it is at the peak and epicenter of the pandemic” (Santa Catarina, 2021). The ABPA (poultry and pork sector) representative, Marcelo Medina Osório, argued that worker health and safety were a priority for his association and that the Brazilian meat industry had international recognition and support. In the same vein, the organization’s labor consultant, Moacir Ceriguelli, claimed that the sector had provided an “exemplary response to the pandemic,” and that in many cities in the state, the meat processing plant was “the safest place in the city” (id.). Therefore, the sole objective of ABPA’s actions was “to update, simplify and harmonize the existing regulation” (id.).

For their part, union representatives reiterated the importance of Regulatory Norm 36/2013 and questioned the relevance of modifying and making the existing legislation more flexible at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had greatly affected meat processing workers. The union members also sought to clarify that the temperature-related breaks of 20 minutes for every 100 minutes worked were, in their view, non-negotiable, as they were “the most important element for ensuring the workers’ health” (id.). The president of the *Federação dos Trabalhadores da Indústria de Alimentação de Santa Catarina* [Santa Catarina Federation of Food Industry Workers], Celio Elias, declared that the unions would not like to go abroad to denounce that “Brazilian meat is seasoned with the worker’s suffering” (id.), and that the mere fact of discussing changes in the middle of a pandemic was “distressing.”

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<sup>13</sup> See “A carne mais barata do mercado...” [The cheapest meat on the market...], 2020.

The appraisal of PL 2363/2020 ended up being removed from the agenda of the session of the lower house Commission on Work the following day, by agreement among party leaders. However, the review process of Regulatory Norm 36/2013 continues within the scope of a Tripartite Commission established by the Ministry of the Economy, with completion expected in August 2021. The proposals submitted by the employer sector during the public consultation for the revision of the norm deal precisely with the temperature-related breaks determined by the CLT and regulated by the norm, since they amount to one hour of activity per worker during a daily work period, without altering their remuneration (Brasil, 2020j). Thus, if it is true that the novel coronavirus pandemic has sharply and dramatically exposed the contradictions that characterize the current moment of capitalism (Aumercier et al., 2020), exposing several layers of vulnerability beyond the crude biological reality of contamination (Segata, 2020), it would be no different for the issue of the pace of work in meat processing production and its environmental unhealthy conditions, which have long been the main focus of conflict between capital and labor in this segment of the economy.

### **The new capitalism became flesh: conclusions**

The trajectory of the formation and insertion of the Brazilian meat industry in the global chains of the world market is long and intricate. Its general outlines, however, they closely follow the necropolitical vectors of its business model, particularly in the manner of organizing and exploiting subaltern persons, dispossessing traditional communities, producing large-scale animal suffering and degrading the environment. Meat processing plants have been historical spaces for the materialization of structural violence and shared suffering between humans and animals in industrial society, where denunciation and criticism, recently intensified by interdisciplinary means (scientific, journalistic and ethnographic), still finds little resonance in public debate.

If meat processing plants operate on the logic of “intensive speciesism” (Florit et al., 2019), we feel that the perspective of “multispecies health” (Brown & Nading, 2019; Segata et al., 2021) can offer a comprehensive plan that focalizes the suffering of humans and non-humans linked to the meat industry. The notion of multispecies health defended here is critically placed in relation to the known policies based on the *Saúde Única* [Unified Health], that end up echoing extrinsic models to local sensitivities, which is already common practice in the sphere of global health, from which it is derived. Furthermore, this perspective allows us to overcome a historical analytical dichotomy and understand, on the same plane, the movement of environmental, animal and human predation. A multispecies suffering or, perhaps, a *multi-speciesism* that, combined with an incessant prospection of food markets and an unlimited increase in the production and consumption of food industry products, conforms to an intense pattern of the formation and acceleration of syndemics and environmental crises from spaces so conspicuous in our way of life, such as meat processing plants, industrial farms, and cattle ranches that expand in the wake of agribusiness.

It is clear that disaster capitalism and the shock doctrine that we allude to in this article did not invent human-animal suffering and its multiple risks in the meat industry, which is consubstantial to the very history of the animal protein agribusiness. However, the proposal to reduce the temperature-related break in meat processing plants – an integral part of the deregulatory shock waves conceived and applied by the Bolsonaro government during the COVID-19 pandemic – makes work in this sector more vulnerable than ever to occupational and biological risks, making it a locus *par excellence* for the production of its perverse effects (Vale et al., 2021). By *passando a boiada* through dismantling pacts and norms that signal the end of elements central to the environmental and labor milestones resulting from the 1988 Constitution, Brazilian-style necropolitics has crowned this process by defining as “essential” the activities and occupations where workers most suffer, fall ill and die from the COVID-19 pandemic. In pandemic Brazil, the spirit of the new disaster capitalism became flesh.

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