

## A research agenda for the Social and Human Sciences during the COVID-19 pandemic

Uma agenda de pesquisa para as Ciências Sociais e Humanas em tempos de pandemia da COVID-19

Una agenda de investigación para las Ciencias Sociales y Humanas durante la pandemia COVID-19

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doi: 10.1590/0102-311X00158421

The year 2020 witnessed the global spread of COVID-19, the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, accompanied by the intensification of scientific publications <sup>1</sup>. The year ended with more than 250,000 articles produced worldwide; in October 2020, Brazil ranked 11th in the world in the number of publications <sup>2</sup>. Paradoxically, the year was also marked by severe cuts in government funding for Brazilian science, despite the need for studies to deal with the problems caused by the pandemic. This policy was most evident since March 9, 2020, with *Ruling n. 34* <sup>3</sup> by the Brazilian Graduate Studies Coordinating Board (CAPES), decreasing the number of scholarships, reduced according to the scores assigned to graduate studies programs, heavily impacting programs with lower scores, whose work is strategic at their respective regional levels.

During the same period, the Brazilian National Research Council (CNPq) also announced a budget cutback, affecting research projects already approved or under way, besides threatening not to launch the Universal Call for Projects for 2020. In a meeting with the board of directors of the Brazilian Society for the Advancement of Science (SBPC), the president of CNPq pointed to the “market” as the alternative for replacing research funding, revealing that this link was associated with the development or strengthening of “strategic areas” <sup>4</sup>. This policy position indicates that the only research projects considered strategic are those that respond to the interests of the “market” (i.e., private companies or industry), including the approval of scholarships. Social and Human Sciences are obviously not part of these “priority groups”, since many themes that they address – racism, social inequality, gender relations, democracy, social movements, and many others – do not serve the needs that market logic has defined as strategic. The result is the absence of a specific call for projects for the Social and Human Sciences. When and if overall calls for projects are issued, the share reserved for the Social and Human Sciences would be subordinate, focusing on aspects that converge with the market’s interests.

Given this adverse situation for Brazilian science and technology in general and Social and Human Sciences in particular, the scientific community, through its representative societies and organizations, intensified the movements to confront this dismantlement and to defend the restoration of funding. Mobilizations were headed by the SBPC, professional societies in Collective Health and Bioethics, among others, and associations in the humanities such as the National Association of Graduate Studies and Research in the Social Sciences (ANPOCS) and the Brazilian Association of

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Anthropology (ABA). This growing mobilization included more than 60 organizations, including the Brazilian Association of Collective Health (Abrasco), all of which signed a letter demanding the repeal of the CAPES *Ruling n. 34/2020*.

This movement was partially successful. The de-prioritization of the Social and Human Sciences was met with an initial victory: the Brazilian Ministry of Science, Technology, Innovations, and Communications (MCTIC) issued *Ruling n. 1,329*<sup>5</sup> on March 27, 2020, acknowledging the “essential and crosscutting nature” of the Social and Human Sciences field. However, this formal recognition has not translated thus far in budget terms. Meanwhile, although the Office of the Federal Public Prosecutor (MPF) recommends repealing CAPES *Ruling n. 34/2020*, the ruling is still in force.

On April 20, 2020, Abrasco published the note *We Need Social and Human Sciences to Understand and Confront the COVID-19 Pandemic*<sup>6</sup>. The Management Group of the Abrasco Committee for Social and Human Sciences in Health (CCSHS/Abrasco) immediately convened representatives from all the graduate studies programs in Collective Health in Brazil to discuss the situation and propose alternatives.

Importantly, the pandemic has focused renewed light on science in both the mass media and the public imagination, assigning a positive value to science in the face of denialist attacks that have marked the post-truth age. However, once again the Biological and Genetic Sciences have largely outranked the other sciences in the public eye. In the field of Collective Health, epidemiologists have occupied the media due to the specific knowledge in forecasting scenarios for the spread of COVID-19. This emphasizes the need for a more complex view and calls on the social and human sciences to provide analyses for understanding the pandemic’s social (re)production and the structural inequalities that exacerbate it.

On the one hand, this valorization of different areas of science can be attributed to pragmatic aspects associated with necessary responses in a moment of pandemic emergency, when deciphering the biology and genetics of the virus, the discovery of effective medicines, and the production of epidemiological rates and curves are indispensable for avoiding contagion and deaths, although running the risk of a single-cause approach to the health-disease process. The emergency channels efforts to contain a threat to such valuable things as life<sup>7</sup>, mobilizing governance techniques that draw on epidemic intelligence and trigger policies involving quarantines and surveillance, establish frenetic paces for healthcare workers, and finance vaccine research, all aimed at quelling the epidemic in “real time”<sup>8</sup>. Meanwhile, critical ethnographies have warned of the risk that the focus on the immediate event may overlook the fact that the epidemic takes places in a timespan that extends beyond the emergency, besides disguising the conflicts caused by the need to act immediately<sup>9</sup>. The epidemic emergency is not to be confused with the actual experience of persons and groups, with the effects on their own pace, imagination, and living conditions for following medical and sanitary prescriptions, besides the spinoffs from the effects of truth inherent to biopolitics. These aspects acquire interpretative recalcitrance when scientific discourses are not weighed in relation to the contemporary realities of the infodemic and denialism, which require analytical prudence and a political stance in defense of critical tools that can question the truths, without losing reasonable lessons in the process<sup>10</sup>.

This is the basis (in a political context that disqualifies science and demonizes critical theories, labeled as “cultural Marxism”), for the discomfort emanating from the discourses produced by the social and human sciences that unveil the grounds for the production and reproduction of diseases. Thus, by analyzing the reality of COVID-19, they reveal the relationship between the production of this disease and of so many other health conditions that are simultaneous to preexisting socioeconomic and environmental conditions, exacerbated by health crises. The histories of epidemics and the sociological and anthropological studies of them show that they are related to profound ecological changes and geopolitical situations, determining relations between global health agencies<sup>11</sup> and what Merrill Singer<sup>12</sup> (p. 199-200) calls “underlying structures of social relations that shape complex social architectures of inequality”.

In Brazil, the fertile ground for the production, reproduction, or exacerbation of COVID-19 is shaped in the midst of the obscene social inequality caused by neoliberalism, structural racism, toxic masculinity tied to a patriarchal society, the more recent dismantlement of work conditions, generating precarization and informality and resulting in the uberization of work and overwhelming unemployment, situations aggravated by the widespread cutback in social protection policies, associated with one of the world’s most Draconian economic austerity policies. This context did not begin with

the COVID-19 pandemic but merely reveals the multiple and simultaneous economic, political, and health crises experienced by Brazilian society and aggravated by the pandemic.

This is further exacerbated by the exponential deepening of the country's environmental devastation with a strong correlation with the attack on indigenous and rural populations that suffer the pandemic's heaviest impact. In this sense, the (mis)management of the pandemic by the Federal government intensified the neoliberal logic centered on the assumption of risks and the exposure of populations to death, resulting in the juxtaposition of scientific denialism, authoritarianism, and neoliberal discourse<sup>13</sup>.

Despite considerable production by the Social and Human Sciences on aspects related to the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22</sup>, there is still a flagrant need for creating a specific research agenda identifying key themes for understanding the problem and deepening the investigation of these realities in the long term. There is no doubt that the pandemic merely triggered or aggravated problems that will continue to go unsolved if they are not adequately addressed and confronted. Research in the social and human sciences is known to have advanced the knowledge of epidemics, often producing turning points in the way they are confronted.

The Abrasco Committee for the Social and Human Sciences in Health launched consultations and discussions with representatives of the more than 28 Brazilian programs in the area, aimed at critically analyzing this situation and reflecting on the various watersheds through which the graduate studies programs in Collective Health view the contributions by the Social and Human Sciences to dealing with the pandemic. One of this initiative's results was the collective drafting of a Term of Reference (TR) that explains our lines of thought. We thus declare<sup>23</sup> (p. 1):

*"A basic assumption in the social and human sciences in health is that the health-disease-healthcare triad is mediated by cultural and sociopolitical contexts, material and living conditions, social interactions, personal experiences, historical factors, economic models, and technological innovation. Furthermore, considering that the pandemic's multiple characteristics in various parts of the world, both in the times and ways in which it has been managed in macro and micro contexts, at the State level and in civil society, as well as in the populations affected by it with greater or lesser severity, informed by the most recent epidemiological trends showing that the pandemic grows among the most vulnerable populations in various countries, it is necessary to propose a research agenda that adequately analyzes this complexity. The study of these mediations produces knowledge that should orient protective measures and ways to prevent the pandemic, but also ways of dealing with the suffering it produces, besides elucidating new horizons of possibilities for life associated with its multiple waves, which can be enunciated as post-pandemic space-time".*

We summarize the TR as the need to explore and examine thematic lines that had already proven to be fields of production of relevant knowledge for understanding conditioning factors and dynamics in the presentation of COVID-19, as follows:

- (1) Science and COVID-19: practices and other epistemologies;
- (2) State and COVID-19: policies and governance of the pandemic;
- (3) Discrimination and COVID-19: racism, gender relations, and social inequalities;
- (4) Work and COVID-19;
- (5) Violence and COVID-19;
- (6) Psychological suffering and COVID-19: production of subjectivities, forms of sociability, and resistance;
- (7) Risk and COVID-19: crosscutting aspects with other health/disease events;
- (8) Care, bioethics, and COVID-19; and
- (9) Global emergencies and COVID-19.

We analyze this process as a mobilization that responded to the fundamental needs of social scientists in public health in a precise historical moment and context. First, there was a mandate of knowing to elaborate the state of perplexity we were experiencing vis-à-vis the exceptional phenomenon due to its rarity and the violence of its effects. Second, we added the undeniable urgency of knowing to act on the pandemic's reality as critical analysts of the social reality that it generated and unveiled. Third, there was the requirement of denouncing and resisting the authoritarian and antidemocratic attacks that particularly aimed to silence voices that were critical of arrangements of inequality and oppression. Finally, we determined an affirmative and proactive stance, concretely discussing our capacity to collaborate, even at the limits. We thus conducted a movement of re(existence) constitut-

ing knowledges, practices, and identity within the field of Collective Health and outside the field, in the scientific space.

The TR was submitted to public science promotion agencies in Brazil (MCTIC, Science & Technology Department/Ministry of Health, and State Research Foundations) to apply for specific financing for the area and to politically reaffirm the place of the social and human sciences in health in the pandemic's analysis according to its social, ecological, economic, cultural, and political dimensions, aimed at practical solutions. We knew the limits of this strategy's reach from the onset. Thus far we have only received a reply from the CNPq, informing that it had received "the proposal by Abrasco with satisfaction and attention", but that the agency is "constrained by the Federal budget limitations for larger-scale activities". Nevertheless, we feel that the mobilization of so many social actors and the decision to occupy spaces and lend visibility to the area's production and potentialities to confront one of the principal humanitarian issues of the 21st century situates us in solidarity and strengthens us politically to persevere in our determination to struggle and anticipate projects for a world more positively transformed by "lessons from the virus" <sup>24</sup>.

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All authors contributed equally in the production of the article and approved the final version.

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Submitted on 25/Jun/2021

Final version resubmitted on 27/Aug/2021

Approved on 31/Aug/2021