

Denialism in Brazil: From genealogy to the Covid-19 pandemic as a public policy outline.

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Abstract. This article presents some general lines of understanding of denialism to then observe its presence in Brazil during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Denialism is a concept that is characterized by a lack of scientific knowledge and various knowledge discourses. Initially, we argue that denialism has changed in the last decade, raising the attention of intellectuals, scholars, and the scientific community, especially regarding the narrow limits of lying positions. Following this argument, we focus on the Brazilian case, aiming to understand how the absence of public policies to control the spread of Covid-19 brought denialism to the center of the debate, replacing the possibility of public policies to control the disease. We conclude the study by problematizing the relationship between denialism and social media, to identify how the disinformation campaign, which brought denialism as a public policy outline, was successful in Brazil.

Keywords. Denialism, Genealogy, Public Health, Public Policies, Disinformation.

1. Introduction

Evidence of denialism has reached significant importance recently, particularly considering the context of social health crises, epidemics, and pandemics, which are based on different social phenomena. This article considers the possible definition of denialism, outlining some of the constitutive lines. Our hypothesis concerns the production of a new setting of denialism with the "uses" in Brazil society and politics, during the COVID-19 Pandemics.

Initially, we state that denialism, in scientific research and worldview, currently deserves more attention, due to the heterogeneous nature of this concept. Despite the hierarchy proposed by the hegemonic rationality model, the debate between science and commonsense in recent decades has brought science's language and practice closer to common sense to make science much closer to people's lives [1]. However, this issue proposes a turn into Foucaultian considerations about power and the regime of power, implying the dispute of narratives and regimes of the truth of occidental society [2]. According to Foucault [2], these regimes distinguish true from false, sanctioning true, and techniques for obtaining it. He also stresses on the status of those who affirm what is considered genuine. The variety of knowledge discourses influences the scientific debate on what can be

legitimized as genuine to make a relative to modern scientific consensus.

However, denialism discourse cannot be confused with a deliberate attempt to manipulate social facts and reasons, reversing the sense of reality. As we will show, denialism points to this path from its mediations with science. Thus, the scientific problem can be shifted to a historical and social one. As we shall demonstrate, the epistemological issues of truth and legitimacy demand an understanding of how denialism is a competitor of science, enabling denialists' political and ideological intentions.

2. Genealogy of denialism

2.1 Historical origins

Initially, we can highlight the origins of denialism that came from the field of historical studies and historicism, the methodological debate, and the open possibility of disrespecting the scientific patterns of historical science production and the emergence of a "therapeutic" or opinionated history [3]. In this sense, historical facts are shaped and modulated following the public interest and dogmatic judgments, mitigating the adverse effects of the past on minority groups, subaltern social classes, and identitarian collectives in the present. Therefore, the boundaries between denialism and historical revisionism are not explicit precisely because of the specialized corpus of intellectuals and professionals

claiming and redeeming their opinions' legitimacy.

The French context deserves to be highlighted precisely because of the historiographical, legal, and public concerns about denialism. Originally defined as historical revisionism by Vidal-Naquet [4], it stresses the historiographical production of fraud and fables, aiming to create and maintain personal myths. In this assumption, the revisionist treatment offers several meanings for the political appropriation of fact, especially the vanishment of violence and torture episodes, taking the Holocaust as an epistemological paradigm. Additionally, to maintain this manipulative sense, one refuses official history and social memories using less rigorous methods of source analysis or vulgar inference, which fosters political alignment with nationalism, neonazism, antisemitism, and antisocialism. Valerie Igounet [5] distinguished similar contours in the history of French denialism. In her research, she classifies at least two generations of denialists: Before the 1960s, with the trace of far-right political positions and antisemitism influenced by Nazis' Nuremberg trials, and second generation that, although more intellectualized, constructs ties to ultralight groups, which she argued is French specificity.

In 1990, the statement of Loi Gayssot reflected French historians' concerns, aiming to punish deniers of the genocide of the Jews and racist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic acts by opening a new path of discussion in Europe that evoked the Declaration of Human Rights and of the Citizen of 1789, to protect crimes against the humanities, and to distinguish free speech from crime apologies [6]. This act directed efforts to prohibit deniers from questioning the memory of the Holocaust, such as publishing books and refusing publicly known facts or explicit racism manifestations. Thus, in the French context, but in the 2000s, the public debate appeared to rescue this political sense through a discussion in defense of pluralism, opinion equality, and free speech [7]. In this sense, and despite the local diagnosis, the discursive perversion of denialism was carried out by moving away from political consensus, looking for an equivalence between contradictory "sides" with opposed views and ideologies.

2.2 Denialism in Post-Truth Era

From this initial statement, we argue that denialism has changed in the last decade, raising the attention of intellectuals, scholars, and the scientific community, especially regarding the narrow limits of lying positions. The concept of post-truth partially elucidates this issue. One can relate this to the broad relativism present in a social situation where people are increasingly willing to ignore inconvenient facts and follow their own opinions, even when a contradiction is evident [8]. However, post-truth does not merely ignore reality or the existence of facts, but simply wishes to dispel the mystery in which the creation and maintenance of facts tend to be shrouded' or, indeed, they play a double game: the knowledge game, in which there is no room for

maneuver, and the mind game, in which, is the attention converting the first game [9]. In the clash between a self-opinion and the objectivity of facts, the post-truth contains an epistemic double agent to reach the moral reputation of the truth, making the forms of knowledge more complex. This argument seems epistemologically feasible, but demands a deeper understanding of science and political relations.

Nevertheless, for Oreskes and Conway [10], the climate denial movement strengthened in the US after the 1990s, glancing at the strong relations between scientists and the tobacco industry and denouncing some scientists' morality and economic interests. In this sense, the climate denialism of the 2000s was a consequence of the irresponsible postures of scientists, the interest in increasing consumption and profitability of tobacco industries, a lack of adequate public policy about smoking, and the poor understanding of the population and the US government about the dangers of climate change and global warming. The emerging question is not only the existence of climate change and its consequences. It also includes the epistemological status of doubt and its similarity to that of skepticism. For Oreskes and Conway [10], suspicion rests on factual evidence or casualties figured out by science (i.e., smoking provokes cancer) in public debate by inserting uncertainties into scientific practice. The culpability of scientists, succumbing to the mighty tobacco industry, is an important argument for analyzing the double bond between scientists and industry, on the one hand, and between the doubts raised in the public sphere, on the other hand, by those who are supposed to have precise arguments and any doubt.

In short, the debate above elucidates general ideas about denialism, but with outlines of historical and scientific practices, the epistemological conception of truth and lie, and finally, the consequences of skepticism on scientific arguments and scientists' morality. Thus, we can understand that this is a hard core of denialism, which allows for a more specific understanding of how it develops in each field of debate where denialist positions become evident.

3. Denialism in Brazil during the COVID-19 Pandemics

3.1 Denialism or public policies to control the pandemics?

Although it is a recent phenomenon, scientists have devoted themselves to several analytical contributions, highlighting recent cases of populist governments, such as Donald Trump in the US (2016–2021) and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2018–2022), due to their management of public policies and discursive practices in the combat of coronavirus. Here, we focus on Brazil.

As Van Rengenmortel [11] argues, the Covid-19 pandemic is a complex and unsolvable issue that

requires an interdisciplinary approach combining medical sciences (such as virology, immunology, and epidemiology) with human sciences (including psychology, sociology, and economics) to comprehend the profound impact of an uncontrollable disease on human beings. The study concludes that the pandemic presents multiple and varied problems, which can only be partially alleviated by limited ad hoc interventions, such as addressing scientific denialism, post-truth, and anti-vaccination movements.

Initially, Covid-19 denialism was the option for denying a scientifically proven reality. This means a reduction in life expectancy and quality of life, which has generated a lack of consensus on managing the pandemic based on minimizing the disease and refusing the immunizing agent [12]. In this context, the lack of consensus on the treatment of this phenomenon created a scenario in which the government mitigated the severity of the disease. Therefore, at the height of the pandemic in Brazil, between the second half of 2020 and the first half of 2021, there was an excessive number of contaminations and deaths, followed by depletion of hospital supplies at various times (as in the case of Manaus in late 2020), in addition to high occupancy rates of beds in the intensive care unit [13]. Furthermore, the debate on chloroquine and early treatment is evidence of printed doubt about scientific consensus, resulting in a discourse promoted by false arguments that sought to convince the public, through doubt, to accept an early treatment [14]. In summary, the lack of control over the pandemic and the direction of the public debate toward scientific speculation raised doubts about the existence of the disease and its prevention.

However, several analyses have observed the complexity of this scenario, including its effects on denialism, in addition to its scientific implications. For Caponi [15], the Covid-19 pandemic revealed a growing social acceptance of scientific denialism, disregarding rational arguments in favor of flat Earth perspectives, gender ideology, creationism, and rejection of the human and social sciences. According to the author, when this denialism was assumed to be a government policy, several positions were taken, such as interventions without scientific validation or vertical isolation. Duarte and César [16], in turn, expanded this record and understood the Brazilian case by realizing three moments of denialism: first, as a strategy of denial of politics, which allowed Bolsonaro to be democratically elected and, simultaneously, reject democratic values without breaking with democracy; the second moment, during the pandemic, consolidated the first strategy and elevated denialism as an official policy for managing the pandemic; and finally, a third moment mixed the previous strategy, adding the trivialization of deaths, devaluation, and disablement of lives. The combination of scientific denialism and the political position that drives the pandemic is a crucial element of this debate.

In this way, the interpretation points to a few limits between scientific denialism and its political practice in the management of the pandemic by the Brazilian federal government. Fonseca et al [17] understood that Covid-19 deaths were precisely the result of failure to control the pandemic, as seen in the speeches of President Jair Bolsonaro. In this sense, mandatory priority was given to the economy, underestimating the severity of the disease and the high rates of contagion, and promoting misinformation and pseudoscience as a strategy to delegitimize the Ministry of Health and the actions of some state governments. The fundamental question for the authors is that climate change denialism was the element that paved the way for Covid-19 pandemic denialism, using approaches that undermined scientific credibility, both in public health and the environment. Fonseca et al [17] indicate that the conversation about the environment has been perceived as an obstacle to corporate earnings, global warming being considered a secondary and ideological problem, propagated through a "Marxist conspiracy" that seeks to curtail the western economies while boosting China's growth.

Therefore, a path was paved for the discrediting of science through the claim of untested therapy, the dissemination of new antiscientific theories (such as flat Earth and the denial of climate change), and misinformation, promoting confusion between opinions and science. In short, Bolsonaro's denialism regarding Covid-19 can be considered in continuity with climate change denialism, as both work with the idea that it would face alarmism orchestrated by a foreign plot that would harm the country. Brazil has a false trade-off between health and economic growth.

3.2 Denialism as public policy on the disinformatonal age?

In line with the above perspective, it is necessary to understand the political intentions of this denialism, which can be considered a scientific-political nature. This line of argument uses the theoretical perspective of necropolitics [18] as an effect of sovereignty and biopolitics that affects and selects who should live and who should die.

For Ferreira [19], necropolitics ideologically guided the government's responses to pandemics,, tending to the changes in habits and symbolic meaning of the disease in everyday life. Similarly, Cavalcante [20] understands that the denialism of Covid-19 in Brazil was driven by a deliberate strategy of virus circulation, which allowed, among other things, the normalization of deaths and necropolitics. Furthermore, he argues that the presence of denialism reveals political and social postures of ignorance and obscurantism, which, although they are insufficient to explain the rationality and political strength of this government, shed light on denialism as a competitor of a more authentic regime of truth and life present in Brazilian society.

In general terms, therefore, necropolitics can paradoxically be seen both as a cause and an effect of denialism, demonstrating different understandings of the effects of the pandemic and its management policies.

Finally, it is also necessary to understand how the disinformation campaign on the Covid-19 pandemic occurred mainly through social networks. As Herrera-Peco et al [21] noted, the emergence of different conspiracies about vaccines brought to the center of debate the destruction of the credibility of vaccines, science and governmental health councils, and international organizations such as the WHO. To a large extent, a bias of analysis offered by social networks and media is the presence of ordinary citizens who, in their messages, show “the truth” about what was happening to emphasize, as a risk to the population, doubts about the safety of the vaccine but also present the fact that vaccines manipulate the human genetic code.

Therefore, there is a link between antivaccine arguments and the denialism of Covid-19, combined by a network of disinformation that emerges on social networks. Drawing on the aforementioned concepts, there is a connection between denialism and the disinformation age. Denialism, driven by political motives, adopts a scientific-political stance, while the disinformation age enables the rapid and widespread circulation of misleading or false information, primarily through social networks.

For this reason, identifying disinformation dynamics is essential because large volumes of dubious information further destabilize democratic communication [22]. Thus, if the negationism adopted in the Bolsonaro government was based on not taking appropriate measures to control the disease, or even to promote the dissipation of the disease, the mode of disinformation promoted did not impute guilt to it, in contrast. By inducing public opinion to distrust vaccines and other control measures, the only coordinated action by the Brazilian State was precisely to refuse science and promote denialism as “public policy”.

4. Final Considerations

Thus, climate change and scientific denialism offer an epistemological basis for Covid-19 denialism. This argument contains the following two statements: First, with the Covid-19 pandemic, suspicion of the existence and severity of the disease was combined with doubts about the efficacy of vaccines, which implies blurring environmental problems regarding the reasons for the origin of the coronavirus with a false problem of its prophylaxis.

Second, Covid-19 denialism does not create an exacerbated use of conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, and other forms of delegitimizing scientific knowledge and international organizations, improving, on the other hand, the appearance of the efficacy of 'early treatment'. Social

networks and social media were the most important actors that combined both statements. Although this is an aspect that is yet to be sufficiently explored, tweets and personal messages on WhatsApp or Facebook groups, as well as on Telegram or YouTube channels, were common forms of spreading misinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic. In this sense, this content revitalizes an important dimension of historical denialism, the argument of a trustworthy source, dissonant with mainstream knowledge, who would speak the truth directly to the interlocutor. Misinformation is essential for political appropriation, not only to support populist discourses, but also to improve denialism as a public policy.

According to this statement, the Brazilian case is fundamental to understanding how denialism becomes a public health policy. Researchers have debated whether the absence of pandemic control in Brazil is a deliberate form of necropolitics. From our perspective, this argument must consider two aspects: historical denialism and climate change denialism. On the one hand, although the mismanagement of the pandemic in Brazil led to an exacerbated number of deaths, it narrows the similarities with genocide. On the other hand, denialists created an alternative history to suppress the memories of those killed during the pandemic, fictionalizing the facts of the negligence of pandemic control, resembling historical denialism. It is still necessary to consider that, as in climate change denialism, the scandals involving the purchase of overpriced immunizers, which involved the Brazilian government and the Indian company Bharat Biotech, despite the purchase of vaccines from Pfizer, as found in the Pandemic CPI (Brazil, 2021), also indicate the possibility of an industrial lobby in the health sector.

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