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## The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Freedom-Security Tension: Calibrating their Fragile Relationship

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**ABSTRACT.** Grounded in a will to adapt to dangers, and espouse both responsibility and resilience, voluntary measures have largely replaced one of the oldest public health strategies, quarantine. The Covid-19 pandemic, however, elicited a broad sweep of tactics from the archive of public health armoury. On a general level, this review essay addresses the common measures rolled out by various authorities against the pandemic - the lock-downs, reopening process, financial support and vaccination. By relating these measures to 1) the “plague-stricken town”, deployed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe by the *Polizeistaat*; 2) the “self-regulation strategy” that emerged with liberal ideas at the end of the eighteenth century; and 3) the “minimum security” programmed by neoliberal governmentality in the second half of the twentieth century, it is suggested that tensions between freedom and security during, and after, the pandemic can be better understood. To end, the essay noticed that the pandemic has enforced tensions in the administration and calibration of individual wishes and collective wellbeing, creating a fragile “freedom-security relationship” and new problem space for self-regulation.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Lockdown, Self-regulation, Liberal governmentality, Freedom-security.

### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The Covid-19 pandemic has triggered analytical focus on state public health interventions around the world, showing how such measures were both swiftly implemented but also countered. Even if many counter actions were covert, in Western countries, overt protests against lockdown and other restrictions on free circulation multiplied during 2020 and 2021. Public health policies such as vaccination and health passes were questioned by active and noisy groups and were rejected in the everyday by people who just did not consider them necessary. We saw a clamour for “individual freedoms” in countries such as

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<sup>1</sup> The Author gratefully acknowledges the comments and suggestions on previous drafts of this article by two anonymous reviewers for the *Foucault Studies* journal.

Germany, France, the UK, the USA, and Brazil among others. Protest thus took different forms across the world, creating very diverse stories and propositions about the pandemic of analytical interest.

In Brazil, scholars have particularly exposed the workings of right-wing conspiracy theories, showing how some far-right proponents<sup>2</sup> managed to connect the Covid-19 pandemic to an alleged “global communist conspiracy” originating in China. By telling this story about a communist anti-liberal conspiracy, the far-right was proposing to save the moral values linked to liberal capitalism.<sup>3</sup> This narrative strategy had particular implications during the pandemic as it provoked new tensions between individual wishes and collective wellbeing. The forceful story of the far-right fed the already existing fear that had spread and opened up a debate about what mechanisms would be best suited to balance and calibrate between freedom and security. When addressed through this political polarization between the liberal and communist, the COVID-19 pandemic elicited contemplation amongst the general populace and not only among a few self-proclaimed experts. In effect, the new tensions that emerged constrained the effectiveness of state public health interventions, which was a main concern within the Brazilian academic debate.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of a conspiracy against liberal capitalism has a long history and has served different purposes,<sup>5</sup> feeding criticism in different directions depending on contextual circumstances. In *The Great Transformation*, published in 1944 after The Great Depression, Karl Polanyi warned about conspiracy theories inherited from the liberalism of the 1870s and 1880s: “Unable to adduce evidence of any such concerted effort to thwart the liberal movement, he [sic, the liberal] falls back on the practically irrefutable hypothesis of covert action. This is the myth of the anti-liberal conspiracy which in one form or another is common to all liberal interpretations of the events of the 1870s and 1880s”.<sup>6</sup> For Polanyi, these ideas did not allow us to understand the state interventions in the framework of the crisis of liberal capitalism, which had no preference for socialism or nationalism, but sought to

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<sup>2</sup> As Cas Mudde explains, the first decades of the twenty-first century have seen a new wave of the far-right in general and the populist radical right in particular around the world. The impact of this wave has been significant due to the far-right rise affecting the behavior and the expectations of different actors, such as the public, parties, and policies while shifting the agenda of the center-right parties with nativist, xenophobic and authoritarian topics. See Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (2019) and Cas Mudde, “The Study of Populist Radical Right Parties: Towards a Fourth Wave,” *C-REX Working Paper Series 1* (February 2016), 1-23.

<sup>3</sup> See Isabela Kalil, Sofia C. Silveira, Wesley Pinheiro, Álex Kalil, João V. Pereira, Wiverson Azarias, and Ana B. Amparo, “Politics of fear in Brazil: Far-right conspiracy theories on COVID-19,” *Global Discourse* 11:3 (2021), 409-425; and Jakub Wondreys and Cas Mudde, “Victims of the Pandemic? European Far-Right Parties and COVID-19,” *Nationalities Papers* 50:1 (2020), 86-103.

<sup>4</sup> Jessica Farias and Ronaldo Pilati, “COVID-19 as an undesirable political issue: Conspiracy beliefs and intolerance of uncertainty predict adherence to prevention measures,” *Curr Psychol* 42 (2023), 209-219; Marcus Painter and Tian Qiu, “Political Beliefs affect Compliance with Government Mandates,” *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 185 (2021), 1-43; and Gordon Pennycook, Jonathon McPhetres, Bence Bago, and David G. Rand, “Beliefs About COVID-19 in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States: A Novel Test of Political Polarization and Motivated Reasoning,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 48:5 (June 2021), 750-765.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-wing Populist Discourses Mean* (2015).

<sup>6</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* [1944] (2001), 151.

protect the vital social interests affected by the expanding market mechanism. In 1979, at the lecture entitled *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault noted that during and after The Great Depression, German liberals, American libertarians, and other neoliberal intellectuals formulated and disseminated conceptions that linked government protections with a “new despotism” enforced by the state. According to Foucault, this liberal “state-phobia” clouded the understanding of our present:

[T]his type of analysis (...) enable[s] one to avoid paying the price of reality and actuality inasmuch as, in the name of this dynamism of the state, something like a kinship or danger, something like the great fantasy of the paranoid and devouring state can always be found. To that extent, ultimately it hardly matters what one’s grasp of reality is or what profile of actuality reality presents.<sup>7</sup>

Today, with the Covid-19 pandemic, we are seeing far-right advances around the world, both in developed and underdeveloped countries. These groups announce a collective conspiracy, and many of them are “state-phobic”.<sup>8</sup> They claim to work on behalf of freedom and fill it with values that make existing ways to govern through freedom problematic. This essay attends to this accentuated problem space of “freedom” by returning to the freedom-security relationship discussed by Foucault in the lectures *Security, Territory, Population* (1978) and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1979). Using these works to understand the multiple claims to freedom that developed during the Covid-19 pandemic can provide an understanding for why and how novel tensions were created, so visibly, on the surface of everyday political polarization among ordinary people. The concept of governmentality can thus be deployed anew, and a bit differently, to emphasize the engagement of each and all in the question of what way to best govern the population. Both stories about anti-liberal conspiracies as well as academic debate thereof contribute to this “governmentality”. Accordingly, in comparison to Foucault’s main focus on an “assembly of procedures, tactics, calculations, and reflections that allow exercising power over the population, which holds the political economy as its major form of knowledge, and whose main technical instruments are the apparatuses of security”,<sup>9</sup> the governmentality that developed during the pandemic works through other knowledges, tactics and reflections.

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (2008), 188.

<sup>8</sup> Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism. The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (2019).

<sup>9</sup> Foucault coined this definition on his lecture of February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1978, collected in *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978* (2009), 126-145. The first transcriptions of this lecture were published in different languages as “Governmentality”. Indeed, this was the title under which the lecture of February 1<sup>st</sup> appeared in the book by Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, *The Foucault Effect. Studies in Governmentality* (1991), 87-104. However, between the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of governmentality was progressively shifted by Foucault from a historical and determinate sense to a general study of the government of self and the government of the conduct of others. In this article, we will use governmentality to signify the reflections and tactics to structure the possible field of action of others. As Thomas Lemke says, “This can take many forms (e.g., ideological manipulation or rational argumentation, moral advice or economic exploitation), but it does not necessarily mean that power is exercised against the interests of the other part of a power relationship (...). Moreover, power relations do not always result in a removal of liberty or options available to individuals. On the contrary, power in the sense that Foucault gives to the term could result in an ‘empowerment’ or ‘responsibilization’ of subjects, forcing them to ‘free’ decisionmaking in fields

The freedom-security relationship is at the core of liberal governmentality, and, at the same time, it is the source of its tensions and crises. As Foucault stressed, liberal governmentality produces and consumes freedom: “The new governmental reason needs freedom therefore, the new art of government consumes freedom. It consumes freedom, which means that it must produce it. It must produce it, it must organize it”.<sup>10</sup> Thus, freedom is a practice whose conditions should be organised: “Liberalism is not so much the imperative of freedom as the management and organization of the conditions in which one can be free”.<sup>11</sup> There is neither absolute nor isolated freedom but rather freedom linked to governmentality. In fact, the very promotion of freedom entails that the government must deploy a set of limitations and controls to avoid the dangers of freedom. Foucault noticed that the principle of this calculation is called “security”, that is, the government measures to protect freedom from its destructive effects. This is the great paradox of liberalism: “The game of freedom and security is at the very heart of this new governmental reason (...) The problems of (...) the economy of power peculiar to liberalism are internally sustained, as it were, by this interplay of freedom and security.”<sup>12</sup>

On the basis of these ideas, it is possible to think about the specifics of the freedom-security relationship that developed with some of the measures that have attracted most commentaries – the lock-downs, reopening process, financial support, and vaccination. By relating these measures to Foucault’s research on 1) the “plague-stricken town”, deployed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe by the *Polizeistaat*, 2) the “self-regulation strategy” that emerged with liberal ideas at the end of the eighteenth century, and 3) the “minimum security” programmed by neoliberal governmentality in the second half of the twentieth century, it is possible to decipher the historical continuity, but also the innovativeness, that emerged from the administration of biologized life. As Foucault stressed, “in the world we have known since the nineteenth century, a series of governmental rationalities overlap, lean on each other, challenge each other, and struggle with each other”.<sup>13</sup> These different ways of calculating, rationalizing, and regulating the art of government constitute the object of political debate. Without diagnosing the emergence of a new governmentality, this exploration of how freedom and security were balanced and calibrated in novel ways does show how an increasingly fragile notion of “freedom”, to govern through freedom, got established with the pandemic.

## A “PLAGUE-STRICKEN TOWN” YESTERDAY AND TODAY

In many countries around the world, the lockdown was the first health policy measure against the Covid-19 spread. This strategy had initially been deployed in China and

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of action”. Thomas Lemke, “Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique,” *Rethinking Marxism* 14:3 (2002), 53. For a discussion on the concept of governmentality and an overview of “governmentality studies”, see David Walters, *Governmentality: Critical Encounters* (2012).

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 63.

<sup>11</sup> *Birth of Biopolitics*, 63-64.

<sup>12</sup> *Birth of Biopolitics*, 65.

<sup>13</sup> *Birth of Biopolitics*, 313.

harshly questioned by some Western countries. However, as soon as Covid-19 became a pandemic, several governments resorted to lockdown to save the population. “Despite the criticism of China’s approach –said Carlo Caduff–, a crude and extreme version of lockdown became the international norm promoted by experts, officials, and the media across the world”.<sup>14</sup> During 2020 and 2021, as the pandemic worsened and restrictions were extended, the lockdown was the target of criticism around the world.<sup>15</sup> This method has been characterised in different ways. According to some politicians, intellectuals and journalists, the state could not deploy a more intelligent response than to lock people down in different countries overwhelmed by the spread of Covid-19: “Instead of activating existing plans and drawing on concepts such as the Pandemic Severity Assessment Framework, countries imposed a massive, untested, and unproven generic lockdown with unforeseeable social, political, and economic repercussions”.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the lockdown has been characterised as an archaic method from the Middle Ages.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, some far-right expressions claim that the lockdown leads to a general disciplinization in the style of the Chinese-communist model.<sup>18</sup> The lockdown has a long and complex history. If we ask where it came from, how it was used, what needs it satisfied and what its objectives were, we could give different answers to these questions.

We will establish that the lockdown should not be understood as an isolated strategy, since it is part of a constellation of reflections, calculations, and tactics of government. First, we will take up Foucault’s analysis of the “plague-stricken town” model implemented in Europe, and then we will try to understand it within the framework of disciplinary power developed between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Our aim is not only to know the past of lockdown but also to compare its features with the measures deployed in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes the measures that should be deployed when the plague breaks out in a town. These measures were basically two. First, the closing and partitioning of the town’s space; and second, the exhaustive and permanent surveillance of this space. Both measures define disciplinary power:

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded (...), in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is

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<sup>14</sup> Carlo Caduff, “What Went Wrong: Corona and the World after the Full Stop,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 34:4 (July 2020), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Paolo Gerbaudo, “The Pandemic Crowd: Protest in the Time of COVID-19,” *Journal of International Affairs* 73:2 (May 2020), 61-76.

<sup>16</sup> Caduff, “What Went Wrong,” 13.

<sup>17</sup> For example, University of Pennsylvania Press, “A Silent Embrace of ‘The Middle Ages’ Under COVID-19,” [Pennpress.org. https://www.pennpress.org/blog/a-silent-embrace-of-the-middle-ages-under-covid-19/](https://www.pennpress.org/blog/a-silent-embrace-of-the-middle-ages-under-covid-19/) (accessed June 2, 2022), and John Mulhall, “Milan’s medieval response to the plague holds lessons for today,” [Washingtonpost.com. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/27/milans-medieval-response-plague-holds-lessons-today/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/27/milans-medieval-response-plague-holds-lessons-today/) (accessed June 2, 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Kalil et al., “Politics of fear in Brazil”.

constantly located, examined and distributed among living beings, the sick and the dead – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism.<sup>19</sup>

This disciplinary mechanism is based on a centralized system of permanent registration. Each case of illness or death must be reported to the administrative authorities of the town. Every unauthorized movement or every minor infraction and other irregularities must be detected and punished. It is an omnipresent and omniscient power that prescribes a place to each individual: “Against the plague, which is a mixture, discipline brings into play its power, which is one of analysis”.<sup>20</sup> The plague-stricken town model was a very different strategy than those implemented against leprosy during the Middle Ages. While the leprosy strategy divides the people into sick and healthy, the disciplinary mechanism includes all people and distributes them through a reticulated space: “The leper was caught up in a practice of rejection, of exile-enclosure (...); those sick of the plague were caught up in a meticulous tactical partitioning in which individual differentiations were the constricting effects of a power that multiplied, articulated and subdivided itself”.<sup>21</sup> The disciplinary mechanism is an individualizing power; that is, it separates, analyses, and differentiates the crowd of bodies and forces. Each individual has to be in a certain place, and each place has to have an individualised body. Disciplinary power analyses the confused and massive pluralities; it avoids the diffuse circulations, the uncontrolled movements and the dangerous mixtures of bodies: “Its aim is to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual”.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the obedience of people is achieved.

The plague-stricken town model is just one possibility of disciplinary power. It is a response to a specific problem: the plague outbreak in a town. Nevertheless, disciplinary power can be used to control daily life beyond dramatic events such as a pandemic. As Foucault explains, discipline has also been implemented in the school, the hospital, the army, and the prison: “one can speak of the formation of a disciplinary society in this movement that stretches from the enclosed disciplines, a sort of social ‘quarantine’, to an indefinitely generalizable mechanism of ‘panopticism’”.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, discipline not only works in enclosed spaces: it is a mechanism that is also exercised in open spaces. Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the police<sup>24</sup> extended disciplinary power through the social body. The aim of this *Polizeistaat* was to watch human activity in every

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<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975] (1995), 197.

<sup>20</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 197

<sup>21</sup> *Discipline and Punish*, 198.

<sup>22</sup> *Discipline and Punish*, 148.

<sup>23</sup> *Discipline and Punish*, 216.

<sup>24</sup> Foucault refers to the “police” with the meaning that this word had from the end of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century in France and Germany. In this period, the words *police* and *Polizei* had a very different meaning than in English-speaking countries: “When people spoke about police at this moment, they spoke about the specific techniques by which a government in the framework of the state was able to govern people as individuals significantly useful for the world”. Michel Foucault, “The Political Technology of Individuals” [1982], in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (1988), 154.

detail, in every behaviour, and in every relationship. It was “an attempt at a general disciplinarianization, a general regulation of individuals and the territory of the realm in the form of a police based on an essentially urban model”.<sup>25</sup> The police were not only used to maintain law and order but also to provide urban supplies, hygiene, health, handicrafts, and commercial activities. This is something more than a “repressive” power; either way, the *Polizeistaat* played a positive role in taking care of a live, active, and productive man.

Disciplinary power must be understood as a response to different problems and needs. It is not an isolated measure but rather a strategy that combines the enclosure of bodies and police surveillance in open spaces. So, how do we understand the lockdown and other health policy measures in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic? Should we understand the “return” to elements of the plague-stricken town but in new ways, overlapping with techniques of modern rule?

Indeed, the measures against Covid-19 are more sophisticated than the surveillance techniques used by the plague-stricken town model. Surveillance techniques today work through open spaces; still, they can be adapted to each individual and their behaviour: “Countries around the world also concentrate on mass-surveillance technologies to monitor SARS-CoV-2. They created apps to download on citizens’ smartphones in order to track, detect and isolate people positive for Covid-19”.<sup>26</sup> During 2020-2021, in different countries around the world, the lockdown was gradually replaced by a set of measures to control the circulation of people such as social distancing, curfews, household bubbles, indoor capacity limits and strategies to circulate health passes. All these were supported by highly sophisticated surveillance technologies: facial recognition, drones and mobile phone location data, among others.<sup>27</sup> Thus, could we state that the pandemic has triggered a technological change in terms of the exercise of power? We argue that the Covid-19 measures should be analysed beyond these visible aspects. For us, the problem to be considered does not revolve around the question of old methods such as the lockdown or more sophisticated surveillance technologies deployed during the pandemic. Following Foucault’s research, we propose to understand these options by analysing an assembly of reflections, calculations and tactics of government; that is, the “self-regulation” that emerged with liberal ideas at the end of the eighteenth century and the “minimum security” programmed by neoliberal governmentality in the second half of the twentieth century. By relating to these strategies, it is suggested that tensions between freedom and security during, and after, the pandemic can be better understood.

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<sup>25</sup> Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 442.

<sup>26</sup> Anne Wagner, Aleksandra Matulewska, and Sarah Marusek, “Pandemica Panoptica: Biopolitical Management of Viral Spread in the Age of Covid-19,” *International Journal of the Semiotics of Law* 35 (2021), 1104.

<sup>27</sup> See Moran Amit, Heli Kimhi, Tarif Bader, Jacob Chen, Elon Glassberg, and Avi Benov, “Mass-surveillance technologies to fight coronavirus spread: the case of Israel,” *Nature Medicine* 26 (2020), 1167-1169; and J. J. Sylvia IV, “The Biopolitics of Social Distancing,” *Social Media + Society* 6:2 (2020), 1-4.

## CALIBRATING THE FREEDOM-SECURITY RELATIONSHIP DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Our first issue is the lockdown. During 2020 and 2021, the implementation of a full lockdown on most social activities was linked to economic contraction on a global scale. A report by the International Monetary Fund stated that “the economic contraction was driven by the adoption of government lockdowns instead of by people voluntarily reducing social interactions for fear of contracting or spreading the virus”.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, some investigations showed the impact on the mental health of “new realities of working from home, temporary unemployment, home-schooling of children, and lack of physical contact with other family members, friends, and colleagues”,<sup>29</sup> which led to stress, anxiety and a feeling of helplessness in children and adults.<sup>30</sup> Due to its social and economic effects, the lockdown was the target of criticism from some politicians, intellectuals, and journalists. In this context, policymakers and experts scheduled a gradual reopening of activities accompanied by selective policies of testing and isolation, social distancing measures, and other localized and intermittent restrictions. How can we understand these events from the perspective of governmentality? We argue that the lockdown should not be understood as an isolated measure but rather as part of the self-regulation strategy promoted by liberalism. In comparison with the “plague-stricken town” model implemented in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic was a strategy to control the risks of illnesses rather than nullifying them entirely. There are some reasons that illustrate this point. One of them is that, since the outbreak of the pandemic, experts have been discussing “the probable transition to a new phase of SARS-CoV-2 infection in humans as an endemic pathogen, perhaps with intermittent epidemic peaks”.<sup>31</sup> That is, the Covid-19 pandemic could be self-regulated and become an endemic disease. However, this prediction depends on a large amount of data and evidence, such as the virus generation time, the duration of infection, the mutations and variants that would develop during the infection, the severity of these variants, the incidence of cultural and geographic factors, and, not less relevant, the eventual immunity achieved after infection or mass vaccination. In short, “many years of data and theory have told us that it is probably naive to make strong predictions about the evolution of virulence in any complex system”.<sup>32</sup> At the beginning of the pandemic, due to the lack of data and evidence, several Western countries implemented the lockdown to avoid

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<sup>28</sup> International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook: A Long and Difficult Ascent* (2020), 65.

<sup>29</sup> World Health Organization, “#HealthyAtHome - Mental health”, WHO.int. <https://www.who.int/campaigns/connecting-the-world-to-combat-coronavirus/healthyathome/healthyathome---mental-health> (accessed June 15, 2022).

<sup>30</sup> Timothy P. Williams and Kristen Pontalti, *Responding to the Mental Health and Psychosocial Impact of Covid-19 on Children and Families (Child Protection Learning Brief #2)* (2020).

<sup>31</sup> Amalio Telenti, Ann Arvin, Lawrence Corey, Davide Corti, Michael S. Diamond, Michael S., Adolfo García-Sastre, Robert F. Garry, Edward C. Holmes, Phillip S. Pang, and Herbert W. Virgin, “After the pandemic: perspectives on the future trajectory of COVID-19,” *Nature* 596 (August 2021), 495.

<sup>32</sup> Telenti et al., “After the Pandemic,” 497.

the collapse of the healthcare infrastructure.<sup>33</sup> In terms of the self-regulation strategy, if governments took such a radical measure as stopping the circulation of people, it was to strengthen this infrastructure facing a sudden worsening, acceleration, and increase of infections and deaths, not to nullify the disease. That is to say, governments had to stop the circulation and then let the system gradually self-regulate. But a completely natural or spontaneous solution was not expected. Rather, governments proposed an additional set of measures to “flatten the curve”. This leads us to a second issue:

Between 2020 and 2021, the “locked-country approach”<sup>34</sup> was gradually replaced by the strategy of maximizing the good circulation by diminishing the bad. This strategy included social distancing measures, curfews, partial lockdowns in neighbourhoods, cities, and regions, household bubbles, indoor capacity limits, and health passes. Policymakers and experts defined this as the “reopening process”. The reopening process sought to open economic activities while avoiding the collapse of the health system. In this sense, several local governments proposed “roadmaps” to safely reopen the economy, get people back to work, rebuild consumer confidence, and ease social restrictions while minimizing the health impacts of Covid-19.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, there have been many obstacles to achieving homeostasis between the population variables, mainly between public health and economic recovery. In 2020, the WHO warned that “Countries that rush to lift quarantine restrictions designed to contain the coronavirus pandemic risk even worse economic damage”.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, a paper by the World Bank claimed that the reopening process should be synchronized with respect to the pandemic evolution: “a gradual reopening is associated with a stronger recovery and that the faster lifting of the restrictions might hamper the economic recovery. (...) Starting the reopening process early on –with respect to the pandemic’s first peak– is also associated with slower recovery”.<sup>37</sup> In fact, governments had to reverse reopening as Covid-19 spread in the UK, France, Germany, Israel, the USA, and Australia, among many other countries. From the perspective of governmentality, the setbacks of the reopening process not only show the difficulties in scheduling government measures in the midst of the pandemic but also –and more deeply– the

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<sup>33</sup> “What Went Wrong,” 13.

<sup>34</sup> “What Went Wrong,” 4-5.

<sup>35</sup> For example, Buenos Aires City Government, “Plan integral y gradual de puesta en marcha de la Ciudad [Comprehensive and gradual start-up plan for the City],” [buenosaires.gob.ar/coronavirus/plan-integral](https://buenosaires.gob.ar/coronavirus/plan-integral) (accessed July 25, 2022); Commonwealth of Massachusetts, “Reopening Massachusetts,” [Mass.gov. https://www.mass.gov/info-details/reopening-massachusetts](https://www.mass.gov/info-details/reopening-massachusetts) (accessed July 26, 2022); Mayor of London, “A roadmap to the safe and full reopening of London’s economy,” [London.gov.uk. https://www.london.gov.uk/publications/roadmap-safe-and-full-reopening-londons-economy](https://www.london.gov.uk/publications/roadmap-safe-and-full-reopening-londons-economy) (accessed July 26, 2022); New York State, “Reopening New York. Implementing CDC Guidance,” [Governor.ny.gov. https://www.governor.ny.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/NYS\\_CDCGuidance\\_Summary.pdf](https://www.governor.ny.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/NYS_CDCGuidance_Summary.pdf) (accessed July 27, 2022); and São Paulo State Government, “Retomada consciente. Plano São Paulo [Conscious resume. São Paulo Plan],” [Saopaulo.sp.gov.br. https://www.saopaulo.sp.gov.br/planosp/](https://www.saopaulo.sp.gov.br/planosp/) (accessed July 27, 2022).

<sup>36</sup> Berkeley Lovelace Jr., “WHO: Countries that rush to lift restrictions risk ‘severe and prolonged’ damage to economy,” [CNBC.com. https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/03/who-says-countries-that-rush-to-lift-coronavirus-containment-risk-more-severe-and-prolonged-damage-to-economy.html](https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/03/who-says-countries-that-rush-to-lift-coronavirus-containment-risk-more-severe-and-prolonged-damage-to-economy.html) (accessed July 30, 2022).

<sup>37</sup> Asli Demirgüç-Kunt, Michael Lokshin, and Iván Torre, *Opening-up Trajectories and Economic Recovery: Lessons after the First Wave of the COVID-19* (2020), 3.

dilemmas of a strategy that must keep disease and economic recovery within a socially acceptable balance beyond which the order could be in danger. This is linked to two additional issues, both concerning governmental protections:

The rapid development of vaccines and the mass vaccination campaigns deployed in several countries around the world have created the expectation that the pandemic was coming to an end. While experts agreed that vaccination reduces the burden of the disease, they also noticed that this efficacy might have been compromised due to virus mutations: “Although there is no evidence to date of an ongoing ‘antigenic drift’ (...), mutations affecting transmission and disease severity can occur. (...) Vaccines for COVID-19 must therefore continue to be optimized as a matter of urgency”.<sup>38</sup> The emergence of new variants of coronavirus was mainly linked to the disparities in global access to vaccines.<sup>39</sup> The WHO has warned that the majority of vaccines have been administered in high and upper-middle-income countries, while the poorest countries are being excluded from the global vaccine distribution.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the disparities in healthcare access –especially for racial and ethnic minority groups<sup>41</sup> and income inequality despite governmental support. Therefore, the population is subject to risks that cannot be fully controlled by governments and with which the subjects must learn to live. This delicate situation is linked to an ambivalence of the self-regulation strategy. Foucault notices that the self-regulation strategy divides the phenomena of scarcity or pandemic into two levels: the level of the population and the level of the multiplicity of individuals. The self-regulation strategy achieves results at the first level at the expense of the second level. For scarcity or pandemic to self-regulate, some individuals will have to suffer and even die. In other words, the self-regulation is a collective effect, while the pain and deaths are its individual effects: “The final objective is the population. The population is pertinent as the objective, and individuals, the series of individuals, are no longer pertinent as the objective, but simply as the instrument, relay, or condition for obtaining something at the level of the population”.<sup>42</sup> The same political reason has worked during the Covid-19 pandemic: for this pandemic to become endemic, for the economy to recover, or, what is more, to ensure a socially and economically acceptable overall equilibrium, a series of individuals will have “to live dangerously”.

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<sup>38</sup> Manish Sadarangani, Arnaud Marchant, and Tobias R. Kollmann, “Immunological mechanisms of vaccine-induced protection against COVID-19 in humans,” *Nature Reviews Immunology* 21:8 (2021), 475.

<sup>39</sup> See Alexander Smith, “Covid omicron variant linked to vaccine inequality, experts say,” CNBC.com. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/11/30/covid-omicron-variant-linked-to-vaccine-inequality-experts-say.html> (accessed August 5, 2022); United Nations News, “COVID vaccines: Widening inequality and millions vulnerable,” News.un.org. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1100192> (accessed August 5, 2022).

<sup>40</sup> In fact, according to a WHO report, by January 2022, these countries had not achieved the target of vaccinating 10% of the population. See World Health Organization, World Bank, Vaccine Alliance, UNICEF, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization, *Accelerating COVID-19 Vaccine Deployment: Removing Obstacles to Increase Coverage Levels and Protect Those at High Risk* (2022), 10-13.

<sup>41</sup> Leo Lopez, Louis H. Hart, and Mitchell H. Katz, “Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities Related to COVID-19,” *JAMA* 325:8 (2021), 719-720; Daniel R. Morales and Sarah N. Ali, “COVID-19 and disparities affecting ethnic minorities,” *The Lancet* 397:10286 (2021), 1684-1685.

<sup>42</sup> *Security, Territory, Population*, 65.

Finally, in several countries around the world, Covid-19 has triggered governmental financial support to mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic and, especially, of the lockdown. The aims of this support were to make it easier for companies to access credit, help people who are earning a low income, provide subsidies to cover part of employee wages, and assist local economies and businesses that have been more impacted by the pandemic, such as tourism, gastronomy, and culture sectors. According to a survey conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “financing support programmes (...) have been successful in preventing widespread bankruptcies or layoffs while programmes are in use and helping to renew market confidence, including a restoration of liquidity to credit markets following a brief period of stress, thereby avoiding wider economic or employment consequences”.<sup>43</sup> This governmental support has had some ambivalence. On the one hand, following Foucault’s analysis, it is a way of promoting freedom of work, freedom of production, and freedom of consumption in a dangerous situation. Thus, the volume of social protection has increased and, consequently, the economic cost of promoting the conditions of freedom by governments has risen as well. On the other hand, the governmental support against the economic effects of the pandemic differs across countries in their breadth and scope. The OECD stated that these measures were not generally a long-term structural support but rather palliative measures. In many cases, but especially in developing countries, government measures have focused on vulnerable populations without modifying the conditions of vulnerability.

In some aspects, these types of short-term support are linked to the social policies programmed by neoliberal governmentality in the second half of the twentieth century. According to neoliberal rationality, the economy is a game between subjects of interest while the role of the state is to define the rules of this game and ensure their application. The aim of neoliberal social policies is to safeguard players from being excluded from the game: “the function of the social rule, of social regulation, or of social security in the broadest sense of the term, is purely and simply to ensure non-exclusion with regard to an economic game that, apart from this rule, must follow its own course”.<sup>44</sup> Social policy must guarantee supplementary resources to those who provisionally fail to reach a sufficient threshold. These people will be covered by a social policy but only for as long as their situation of vulnerability persists. In other words, it is a “minimum security” that seeks to nullify certain risks on the basis of a minimal level of existence. Hence, there is a “floating population” that will receive assistance from the State when it falls below the subsistence threshold due to certain eventualities, such as an economic crisis, a pandemic

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<sup>43</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *COVID-19 Government Financing Support Programmes for Businesses 2021 Update* (2021), 18.

<sup>44</sup> *Birth of Biopolitics*, 202. This model of social policy, which Foucault also called “negative tax”, was first implemented in Germany and France in the late seventies. We have found it, at least in part, in the financial support and other measures implemented by the Argentinian and Brazilian governments during the first months of the pandemic. See Osvaldo López Ruiz, Pablo M. Méndez, and Brauner Cruz Junior, “A relação liberdade-governo em tempos de pandemia no Brasil e na Argentina,” *Cadernos Gestão Pública e Cidadania* 26:85 (2021), 1-19.

or other natural catastrophe, but will lose this assistance when the risks decrease. However, during the pandemic, in some countries of the world –e. g. Argentina and Brazil– the support has been too short-term, in such a way that “the ‘choice’ facing workers is to either return to a job that puts their life and the life of family members at risk, or to lose their jobs, their income or unemployment support, and their health insurance”.<sup>45</sup>

Lockdown, the reopening process, vaccination and financial support: in the framework of the current governmentality, these measures are a possible –and rational– response of a government that must supervise the normal development of the mechanisms of interest and intervene when these are altered. Thus, they are not necessarily despotic measures against freedom but rather measures to save freedom. They form a way of organising the conditions of freedom with the difficulties and tensions that we have seen. These tensions are linked to a governmentality whose aim is to look for the balance of diverse interests among workers, companies, businesses, and the population in general:

In the principle to which governmental reason must conform, interest is now interests, a complex interplay between individual and collective interests, between social utility and economic profit, between the equilibrium of the market and the regime of public authorities (...). Government, at any rate, government in this new governmental reason, is something that works with interests.<sup>46</sup>

In the end, policymakers and experts expect that the success of the above-mentioned measures will depend on the adherence of the population: “Governments might be sensitive to public perceptions about their efforts to fight the pandemic and to protect the economy. Then, both the timing of lifting the restrictions and the recovery trajectory might depend on the level of public trust in the government”.<sup>47</sup> We can see again the fundamental aspect of liberal governmentality: the government must not oppose the subject of interest. It is thought that the mechanism of interests develops naturally and it cannot be countered by any government action. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the interest is absolutely free. As Foucault states, liberal governmentality works with interests; that is, it includes them in its calculations and techniques of government.<sup>48</sup> On the one hand, the government enables the mechanism of interests to work, but, on the other hand, it manages these interests through variables apparently far removed from the population in order to reduce their dangers and other socially negative effects. In this way, the mechanism of interests is promoted and controlled at the same time; through the interests –and without contradicting them– the government can achieve collective results for the population.

In the Covid-19 pandemic context, governments should therefore accept that the lockdowns and other restrictions cannot be imposed against the population’s interests. If people wish to work, circulate and trade, the government should manage this reality without

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<sup>45</sup> Sylvia, “The Biopolitics of Social Distancing,” 3.

<sup>46</sup> *Birth of Biopolitics*, 44.

<sup>47</sup> Demirgüç-Kunt et al., “Opening-up Trajectories,” 20–21.

<sup>48</sup> *Security, Territory, Population*, 100-105.

contradicting it. In other words, it is necessary to govern according to the reason of the governed people:

The rationality of the governed must serve as the regulating principle for the rationality of government. This is what characterizes liberal rationality: how to model government, the art of government, how to found the principle of rationalization of the art of government on the rational behavior of those who are governed.<sup>49</sup>

The easing of Covid-19 restrictions follows this principle. An adjustment between the governmental measures and the reason of governed people is pursued every day at the level of countries, cities and even districts. This adjustment does not work according to a *de jure* limit but rather a *de facto* limit. It is an indefinite adjustment that proceeds by testing the reason of governed people. During 2020 and 2021, several governments faced serious difficulties to obtain the adherence of the population to health policies. Despite the efforts of scientists and policy makers, a lot of people refused to get vaccinated, in part due to the activities of the anti-vaccine groups –especially in the USA and Europe– and also because of vaccine hesitancy.<sup>50</sup> Throughout 2021, protests against health passes were registered in Belgium, France, Italy, Spain and Bulgaria, among other countries.<sup>51</sup> These phenomena show that it is not easy to govern according to the reason of the governed people: maybe because there is not only one rational behaviour –or, even more, because the pandemic unhinges any reason.

The Covid-19 pandemic has hardly been able to be regularized: “The overall uncertainty of these parameters makes it difficult to accurately predict the future post-pandemic equilibrium between SARS-CoV-2 and the human population”.<sup>52</sup> This complex scenario suggests more than just a series of scientific and technical challenges. As we indicated in this essay, *the Covid-19 pandemic is not only a public health issue but also provokes great tension in the freedom-security relationship.*

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

As the pandemic arrived, the problem of “how to govern in the best way” crept up to the surface of ordinary people, who became interested in the measures to be implemented, assumedly, by “everyone” assembled into a unity. The freedom-security relationship has since been at the core of the concerns of government and the people governed. In many countries around the world, this has implied an increasing difficulty for “government through freedom”. We argued that these tensions are linked to a governmentality that

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<sup>49</sup> *Birth of Biopolitics*, 312.

<sup>50</sup> John McAteer, Inci Yildirim, and Ann Chahroudi, “The VACCINES Act: Deciphering Vaccine Hesitancy in the Time of COVID-19,” *Clinical Infectious Disease* 71:15 (2022); Samuel Pullan, and Mrinalini Dey, “Vaccine hesitancy and anti-vaccination in the time of COVID-19: A Google Trends analysis,” *Vaccine* 39:14 (2021).

<sup>51</sup> BBC News, “Covid: Huge protests across Europe over new restrictions,” BBC.com. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59363256> (accessed September 3, 2022).

<sup>52</sup> “After the pandemic,” 496.

looks for the balance of diverse interests of the population, including workers, businesses and ordinary people who were concerned about their wellbeing and physical health. This made freedom itself a conflictive issue which surfaced and thrived during the pandemic along with the formal political measurements taken. In effect, the heterogeneity of freedom was accentuated, making it possible to speak of "freedoms" in plural. People increasingly disagreed on what freedom should contain and, above all, the pandemic shifted attention to how the freedom of some could threaten the freedom of others.

This means that there have been multiple and contradictory interests among the population. For example, since the pandemic, we have seen a polarization in different countries, such as Argentina, Brazil or the USA, between those who have demanded the state take formal political measures and protections to guarantee health and those who have demanded freedom to work and produce.<sup>53</sup> In some cases, this polarization was incremented by activities of right-wing people who expressed that freedom is necessarily opposed to formal state government and who told stories about a communist anti-liberal conspiracy. The "state-phobia" of these groups led to new tensions that complicated the formal measures implemented with the aim to flatten the curve of infections and slow down the spread of the virus. Between 2020 and 2021, we witnessed the activities of the anti-vaccine groups, protests against health passes, and resistance to lock-downs. Some of these expressions hoisted moral values that made existing ways to govern through freedom problematic, demanding more formal responses. In turn, these responses opened up further debate about what mechanisms would be best suited for a smoother balancing and calibration of the freedom-security relationship.

The concept of governmentality can help us understand why and how these novel tensions were created on the surface of everyday political polarization among ordinary people. We have shown through this essay that the freedoms depend on formal governmental interventions and government at a distance. Governmentality is constantly organizing and securing the conditions on which individuals are supposed to experience freedom and, furthermore, the conditions on which each subject may freely follow their interest and self-regulate to secure collective wellbeing. During the pandemic and after, this function of governmentality became ambiguous since the polarized debate that arose produced and introduced additional freedoms to the calibration of freedom and security. Thus, the very promotion of freedom's conditions entails that formal government must deploy a set of limitations and controls, which during the Covid-19 pandemic were lock-downs, reopening processes, financial support, and vaccination. This was a way of promoting and increasing freedom of work, freedom of production, freedom of consumption, and so on in a dangerous situation where no one knew the best way to optimize collective wellbeing. More than a communist anti-liberal conspiracy, these formal government measures revealed novel tensions for population management and difficulties for government through freedom and self-regulation.

Calibrating the freedom-security relationship is a task which is difficult as well as never-ending; that is to say, it is a non-static process of the regularization and

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<sup>53</sup> López Ruiz et al., "A relação liberdade-governo".

administration of populations. This non-static process includes governmental rationalities that overlap, support, challenge, and fight each other. We have shown how the problem space for government through freedom has been reconfigured in relation to what we can see by looking at the pandemic through the plague-stricken town. From the eighteenth century, grounded in a will to adapt to dangers and espouse both responsibility and resilience, voluntary measures have largely replaced the quarantine as a tactic to promote life. The Covid-19 pandemic, however, elicited and renewed this tactic from the archive of public health armoury. As this essay elicits, the lockdown has a long and complex history. It has satisfied multiple needs and followed different objectives. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the aim of the “plague-stricken town” model was to stop infections and to nullify the disease. During the pandemic, the lockdown was part of a strategy to control the risks of illnesses rather than nullifying them entirely while the freedom-security relationship could be calibrated anew. Additionally, in several countries the lockdown was gradually replaced by a reopening process that included social distancing measures, curfews, household bubbles, indoor capacity limits, and health passes. Furthermore, the lockdown and reopening process were accompanied by the social policies programmed by neoliberal governmentality; basically, a short-term financial support to guarantee a minimum security for a floating population. All these measures were implemented while the vaccination campaigns were being developed with the expectation that Covid-19 would become a post-pandemic endemic disease. Hence, it is possible to decipher the historical continuity, but also the innovativeness, that emerged from the administration of biologized life during the pandemic. This essay highlights that the administration of populations *is a continuous exercise* which has several tensions when it comes to calibrating individual wishes and collective well-being when these two are made increasingly negotiable. For future research, it is important to explore further how freedom and security are balanced and calibrated in novel ways to investigate how an exceptionally fragile relationship between the two has been established since the arrival of the pandemic.

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