

## EDITORIAL

# Inequality, hunger, and food production

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This issue of *Revista Katálysis* presents a timely, pertinent, and absolutely necessary topic. When approaching inequality and hunger as phenomena inherent to the development of capitalism, we investigate the singularities of the current Brazilian context, identifying its historical determinations in the scope of the dialectical and contradictory relationship between the growth of wealth and pauperization. These processes became more acute with the capitalist crisis and, within it, the health crisis, overthrowing civilizational achievements.

We look to the synthesis carried out by Karl Polanyi in his book, *A Grande Transformação* [The Great Transformation] (Polanyi, 2021, p.172), which identifies the emergence of poverty and hunger as phenomena of the sixteenth century — therefore, in force for five centuries — and that by force of the class struggle, became the object of state intervention, through the constitution of social rights and social security measures in the twentieth century.

Polanyi refers to the UK, the heart of the classical industrial revolution. For him, the emergence of modern poverty in the sixteenth century is directly related to the end of feudalism. This process transformed a population without land and means of survival “into a class of free laborers [that] was the combined result of the fierce persecution of vagrancy and the fostering of domestic industry which was powerfully helped by a continuous expansion of foreign trade” (Polanyi, 2021, p. 172).

Originally the object of bloodthirsty laws (Marx, 2017, p. 805-813) and other similar measures, such as the Poor Law and the Speenhamland Law (Polanyi, 2021, p. 139-170), the fencing off and expropriation of land determined the emergence of what Polanyi conceptualized as *new poverty*, in the context of the *new society* that emerged: capitalism.

From the seventeenth century onward, pauperism and its main expression, hunger, became the object of theorization of the most diverse thinkers of the time (liberals, socialists, naturalists, and conservatives). Smith, Townsend, Owen, Ricardo, Proudhon, and Burke, among others (Polanyi, 171-202), sometimes treated poverty from the perspective of assistance to the poor or addressed it by discussing its causes. Although showing divergent points of view, these thinkers defended that the poor should work, considering that hunger would be eliminated with the use of cheap labor, convinced that “an appropriate organization of the labor of the unemployed must produce a surplus” (Polanyi, 2021, p. 179), which occurred in the twentieth century.

Thinkers such as Smith, Ricardo, and Burke (Polanyi, 2021, p. 181-201), extensively discussed the relationship between labor, the free market, and the meaning of poverty in the context of liberal and



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conservative thought, aware of the weight of labor in the production of wealth. However, during the nineteenth century, in the face of the class struggle, the relationship between the free market and the welfare state – still present today – transformed the issues of poverty and labor into an eminently political issue.

The antipodean approach criticizes political economy and opposes the thinkers referred to in Polanyi's synthesis (2021). Although taking the same starting point, Marx (2017) radically analyzed the determinations of the emergence of the poor in the classic Chapter XXIV of Book 1 of *Capital*, Primitive Accumulation, considered by him, the starting point of the capitalist mode of production (Marx, 2017, p. 785; Rosdolsky, 2001, p. 209-235). When referring to the meaning of primitive accumulation, he ironically states that it is the original sin of political economy, in an allusion to theology. He argued:

The legend of theological original sin tells us certainly how man came to be condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow; but the history of economic original sin reveals to us that there are people to whom this is by no means essential. [...] And from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority that, despite all its labour, has up to now nothing to sell but itself, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly although they have long ceased to work. (Marx, 2017, p. 785)

In a critical dialogue with liberals and conservatives who saw salaried labor of the poor and surplus-population as a means of producing private wealth, Marx considered that the capitalist subjugation of the worker began there. He refers to it as a kind of change in the form of feudal serfdom when large masses of human beings were suddenly and violently torn from their means of subsistence and thrown into the labor market as free proletarians (Marx, 2017, p. 787).

Violently expropriated from the land and given over to vagabondage, the expropriated population was “whipped, branded, tortured by laws grotesquely terrible [ah, the laws!], into the discipline necessary for the wage system.” Thus, the conditions were set so “the advance of capitalist production develops a working class, which by education, tradition, habit, looks upon the conditions of that mode of production as self-evident laws of Nature” (Marx, 2017, p.808). According to Marx's analysis:

In the history of primitive accumulation, all revolutions are epoch-making that act as levers for the capital class in course of formation; but, above all, *those moments when great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled as free and “unattached” proletarians on the labor-market. The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil, is the basis of the whole process. The history of this expropriation, in different countries, assumes different aspects, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different periods.* In England alone, which we take as our example, has it the classic form (Marx, 2017, p. 788, emphasis added).

Thus, it was historically consolidated the process in which the mass of workers — employed or surplus — came to depend on selling their workforce to obtain means of subsistence, now organized through wages and the market. Workers, always threatened by a surplus population pressuring wages down, are subjected to unemployment, poverty, and hunger. This process expelled and expropriated part of the rural population and simultaneously freed workers to be subjugated to the industrial capital, creating an internal market. The means of life — subsistence production and non-market labor — were transformed into commodities, and workers were progressively alienated from the work instruments and products.

The material bases and some of the ideopolitical traits of dealing with poverty and inequality have been established secularly. However, they can be identified nowadays under new content and form. They are found in antagonistic social classes, labor exploitation, and value and private property production. Societies have indeed become more complex. Many historical mediations run through the development of capitalism and the very configuration of the working class, its means of struggle, and the mechanisms of capital control over labor. However, it is undeniable that, unlike the social formations before capitalism, pauperism does not come from generalized poverty but from a continuous production of wealth.

The dynamics of capitalism acquired new configurations in this current historical period. Among these configurations are the expansion of the financialization process and its connections to the productive base in the production of unimaginable profit and the objective expressions of class struggle and state action. Processes that trigger particularities in central and peripheral countries, sometimes crossed by the economic, political,

and social, in addition to the health crisis resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, in a scenario made even more complex by the existence of the imperialist war between Russia and Ukraine.

There is a worldwide worsening of poverty, mediated by regressive political setbacks, in Brazil and internationally, with the brutal resurgence of social inequalities. This challenge is revealed by the ten thematic articles published in this issue of *Revista Katálysis*, including questioning the production of food in the process of commodification and commoditization of Brazilian agricultural production, alongside the dismantling of structuring social policies, including food security.

The Oxfam-Brasil Report released in May 2022 (Oxfam, 2022), at the time of the Davos meeting, argues that the pandemic has increased inequalities along with the rise in food prices in 2022, which will take 263 million people worldwide to extreme poverty, increasing hunger and the lack of material and social conditions for the working and impoverished population.

The report provides us with a snapshot of the expressions of inequalities. However, the publication's agenda reveals a bet on progressive tax measures that should be used to reduce inequalities: urgent pandemic tax on the excessive profits of the world's largest corporations; urgent 99% pandemic solidarity tax on new billionaire wealth; permanent estate tax for the richest. As expected, everything suggests that the institution promoting the study has an idyllic vision of the feasibility of this proposal, especially in the face of the global mobility of money and the wealth of billionaires, who had record profits during the pandemic in the food, pharmaceuticals, energy and technology sectors while millions of people around the world faced a cost-of-living crisis.

According to data published in the report, billionaires' fortunes increased the equivalent of 23 years in just 24 months. Billionaires in the food and energy sectors increased their fortunes by a billion dollars every two days. There were 62 new billionaires in the food industry, and a new billionaire emerged on average every 30 hours during the pandemic. At the same time that a new billionaire appeared, a million people fell into extreme poverty.

The Covid-19 pandemic is clearly a humanitarian catastrophe that led to the illness and death of millions of people. Like any human-social phenomenon, understanding the pandemic requires historical contextualization: placing it in the macro-social conditions of capitalist dynamics that govern the production of social wealth and the ways of life of the world population without neglecting the implications of the capitalist crisis and the neoliberal offensive observed in these last decades (Mota; Rodrigues, 2021). It is possible to verify overlaps between the metamorphoses of the twenty-first-century capitalism and the emergence of the health crisis mediated by the destructive production of nature, illegal trade in fauna and flora, expropriation of land for food production aimed at human subsistence, and the concomitant growth of large land ownership and agribusiness. These trends give particular characteristics to the expressions and means of confrontation in each region and country.

Although the dominant discourse attributes the Covid-19 pandemic as the main cause of the economic and social crisis that affects central and peripheral countries, the fact is that the pandemic does not respond to the contradictions of the capitalist world. On the contrary, the health crisis is potentiated by the bourgeoisie's strategies to face the crisis of capital, reverse the profit rate fall through initiatives that redefine the international division of labor, and institute renewed forms of labor exploitation.

In Brazil, subaltern classes are socially unprotected and characterized by social relations based on class, gender, race, and overexploitation. The country inherited a social formation with roots in the colonial system, in slave labor, and in the latifundium, where capitalist modernization is historically based on dependence and subordination to imperialist capital, under the domination of bourgeois autocracy and political and economic exclusion of the working and subaltern classes (Fernandes, 1987).

These historical determinations remain in force and spread under different expressions, marked by unprecedented social, economic, and civilizing regressivity, carried out by the current extreme right-wing government of President Jair Messias Bolsonaro. This is aggravated by the preexistence of precarious infrastructural conditions, cuts, and dismantling of policies, one example being Constitutional Amendment 95, which constitutionalized the fiscal adjustment by freezing the federal government's primary spending for 20 years. Decades of neoliberal economic policies have transformed public services into commodities, encouraging corporate wealth and tax evasion that have eroded public funds, workers' rights, and living conditions.

The *Rede Brasileira de Pesquisa em Soberania e Segurança Alimentar* [Brazilian Research Network on Sovereignty and Food Security] (Penssan) released a survey on food insecurity in the context of the pandemic. The institution reports that the number of Brazilians who are hungry jumped, in just one year, from 19 million to 33.1 million. In Brazil – a powerhouse of agriculture production and agribusiness – almost six out of ten Brazilians (58.7% of the population) live with food insecurity to some degree (mild, moderate, or severe). According to the survey, the country has regressed to a level equivalent to the 1990s. Of every ten households, only four manage to maintain full access to food. The other six are divided among those who are permanently worried about the possibility of not having food. In absolute numbers, 125.2 million Brazilians have experienced some degree of food insecurity – an increase of 7.2% since 2020 and 60% compared to 2018. To make matters worse, those who produce food are experiencing hunger, as hunger affects 21.8% of family farmers (Penssan, 2022).

In this environment, the opportunism and strategies of the dominant classes gain breath, either through state actions, under the direction of a protofascist and militarized government, or through the private apparatus of hegemony, in a climate of fierce struggle and political class confrontations. Coercive and consensual strategies are activated, both in the ideo-cultural field and in the repressive apparatus, whose main highlight of cultural offensiveness is the use of social media and robotic communication technologies over the Internet, whether in the form of fake news or advertising appeals, through the action of digital influencers, affecting all aspects of everyday life (Rodrigues; Mota, 2021).

By exposing the ills and contradictions of contemporary capitalism – where greed for wealth accumulation comes at the expense of the working class' exploitation and pauperization, the ruling classes turn the confrontation of inequality, hunger, and misery into a matter of volunteering and emergency care, outside structuring social policies. They relegate the measures to tackle these challenges to punctual and fragmentary actions for easy populist and electoral use (Mota; Rodrigues, 2021).

When keeping the necessary distances and considering the historical contexts, it may be possible to realize how much the ruling classes — secularly — assume that overcoming hunger and poverty is the way to face the barbarization of life and insist that hunger depends on work, even if there is no work. As for the structural surplus-population, the potential users of what is left over from welfare policies, their fate is to depend on voluntary and punctual social assistance, in a crude reissue of the liberal measures present at the dawn of capitalism.

When theorizing about contemporary capitalism, Harvey (2004) states that, in the course of its development, capitalism marks the unity between the potentiation of labor exploitation and that of the material and social spoliation (land, nature, money, resources, rights, and livelihoods of the working and subaltern population), concluding that social spoliation is the hallmark of the “new imperialism” (Harvey, 2004).

When considering this dynamic, we identify a re-signification and historical update of the expropriations category in contemporary capitalism, which perpetuates the saga of impoverished populations since the emergence of capitalism, turning the production of food into goods that generate stratospheric profits, as part of the process of expanded capital reproduction. Thus, the expropriation of the right to decent food reveals the genetic need of capital to expropriate workers but adopting updated means, forms, and strategies, making them consonant with the capitalist dynamics of the twenty-first century (Mota, 2018).

Thus, expropriations were not restricted to a historical phase of capitalism, as one might think in terms of primitive accumulation processes – marked by the original expropriation of land and workers' means of production in the early days of capitalism. We are witnessing modern expropriations, compatible with the capitalism of this century, despite the abysmal differences compared to the past. Nowadays, the state of the dominant classes becomes permeable to poverty, but it does so within the limits of its needs. This context favors the emergence and recurrence of cash transfer programs, named “auxílios” [aid] (as the current Brazilian government did) and the mobilization of volunteers in initiatives led by civil society (nonprofits, business foundations, social movements) with the support of mass media. These initiatives are labeled as assistance policies for the poor, the object of moral solidarity of the dominant class and workers themselves toward those who cannot ensure means of survival.

Although we are facing a pessimistic situation, the set of articles published in this issue of *Revista Katalysis* encourages us to reflect on objective reality, whose eversion calls for the organization and struggle of subaltern classes, reiterating the classic Marxian statement that men and women make history but under certain conditions and relationships. The political and public confrontation of inequality, hunger, and poverty will depend on this making of history.

We conclude by quoting an extract from one of this issue's articles:

The Human Right to Food, which is not limited to guaranteeing permanent income and access to the market, can only be fully accomplished when it meets human needs, guaranteeing quality and sufficient food [...] The expropriation of this right [...] increasingly separates most of society from any possible way of producing, distributing, and even consuming. Food is a strange being, alien to those who produce it. [...] hunger is an expression of the social issue and is even part of the mode of production's structure insofar as it will always be present, due to the unequal form of appropriation of the wealth produced, but also as it has a key role in extracting surplus and value realization. (Silva Filho, 2022, our translation).

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