

Cura ut Valeas! Multiple uses and facets of masks in times of pandemic

Cure ut Valeas! Multiples utilisations et visages des masques pendant la pandémie

Cura ut Valeas! Múltiplos usos e faces das máscaras em tempos de pandemia

Rosemere Maia

Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro
rosemaia@terra.com.br

Carlos Eduardo Santos Maia

Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora
calрмаia@uol.com.br

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has been “officially” spreading across the planet since January this year. This disease has provoked victims and highlighted the need for the adoption of protective measures by various professionals and the population in general. This article aims to discuss the use of masks in public and private spaces for collective use where such tool is fundamental for the protection and containment of the coronavirus. However, before starting the discussion, I analyze the use of masks in other space-times, focusing on some of their meanings and symbolologies in those social contexts. In terms of methodology, the research is based on bibliographic and documentary research from different sources (websites, books, magazines, reports, and blogs). On the conclusions, some questions are presented instead of closed and anticipated propositions, propositions that are not consistent with the prevalence of so many uncertainties.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Public Space, Private space for collective use.

Résumé

La COVID19, pandémie qui se répand sur toute la planète «officiellement» depuis le mois de janvier de cette année, a fait d'innombrables victimes mais a aussi fait apparaître l'impérieuse nécessité de mettre en place des mesures de protection dans de nombreuses professions et dans la population en général. Cet article se propose d'aborder l'emploi de masques dans les espaces publics et privé à usage collectif où cet équipement se montre essentiel pour la protection des individus et pour endiguer le coronavirus. Mais avant cela, on fera un rapide analyse de l'utilisation du masque dans

d'autres espaces-temps, centrée sur quelques-unes de ses significations et de ses symbolologies dans ces contextes sociaux. Du point de vue méthodologique, le texte s'appuie sur une recherche bibliographique et documentaire auprès de diverses sources (sites internet, livres, revues, reportages, blogs). Les conclusions offrent plutôt des interrogations que des thèses abouties et prématurées, hors de propos face à tant d'incertitudes.

Mots-clés: COVID-19, pandémie, espace public, espace privé à usage collectif.

Resumo

A COVID19, pandemia que se alastra "oficialmente" pelo planeta desde janeiro do ano em curso, não só tem provocado vítimas como também evidenciado a necessidade de adoção de medidas de proteção por parte de diversos profissionais e da população em geral. No presente artigo, objetiva-se abordar o uso de máscaras em espaços públicos e privados de uso coletivo, onde tal equipamento se impõe como fundamental para proteção e contenção do coronavírus. Antes, porém, faz-se uma análise acerca do uso de máscara em outros espaços-tempos, enfocando-se alguns de seus significados e simbologias naqueles contextos sociais. Metodologicamente, o texto se baseia em pesquisa bibliográfica e documental de diversas fontes (sites, livros, revistas, reportagens, blogs). Nas conclusões, apresentam-se principalmente alguns questionamentos ao invés de proposituras fechadas e antecipadas, proposituras estas não condizentes com a prevalência de tantas incertezas.

Palavras-chave: COVID-19, Pandemia, Espaço Público, Espaço Privado de Uso Coletivo.

Introduction

An issue has emerged in the midst of the devastation caused by COVID-19, the pandemic that has been wreaking havoc on the entire world and claiming countless victims since January 2020: the wearing of masks in public and shared private spaces.

We acknowledge the importance of the debate on the classification of masks by health organizations and/or institutions as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in an epidemiological context. Nevertheless, this paper discusses how these artifacts serve as symbolic codes for socio-spatial¹, cultural, political, and public health issues, which are not antagonistic to their use as PPEs.

In this paper, masks are regarded as protective articles, but also as having the potential to hide or to unveil, to distinguish or to equalize, to segregate and to group. Although this may not always be immediately discernible, it is fundamental to understanding the social role they assume at a time when the world is focused on the fight against the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus that brought about COVID-19.

¹ We opted for the use of socio-spatial (hyphenated), contrary to the Portuguese Language Orthographic Agreement (1990) from the discussion of Souza (2007).

Masks yesterday and nowadays: When history repeats itself, sometimes as a tragedy, sometimes as a comedy

The use of masks is as old as human ritualistic practices themselves, and because of this they are a *sine qua non* for the analysis of the meaning of the human being. They have been used over the centuries (or millennia) by every civilization for various purposes and rituals: to represent deities, supernatural beings, social archetypes, and renowned dead; to emphasize their close association with different time-spaces, beliefs, and transcendental motivations of the social group from which it originated. On account of being widely associated with ritualistic practices, the use of masks implies spatial direction and positioning, emotional content, agency, changing boundaries, and collective identifications in co-presence. This is in line with Maia's (2010) remarks regarding the "geographicity" of rituals based on Parkin and other authors.

According to records in cave paintings, the so-called primitive men already used masks while hunting, most likely due to their belief in its ability to attract prey or provide protection from animals. Klintowitz notes that in "primitive" societies, which he refers to as ritualistic, "the use of masks [...] is extremely precise. The mask means the spirit, the unapproachable breath, the immaterial, the vital spirit of nature." In these social groups, in which time is perceived in a "circular way and at each cycle—solar, lunar, agricultural—the community returns to ground zero," the author concluded that "the use of the mask [...] carries out [...] an exchange between culture and myth, between the social system and the origin and mythical hierarchy." Additionally, it also presents an exchange between culture (i.e., religions, food, medicine, festivals, etc.) and nature (i.e., hunting, gathering, harvesting, "control" of atmospheric phenomena, etc.). Thus, the mask establishes a link between the social space-time and the mythical universe, where "mythical, magical, and human values are integrated into an essential activity of community balance." (KLINTOWITZ, 1986, pp. 7-8)

In ancient Egypt, the mask was not used as a disguise or means to conceal facial features, but as an instrument to elevate its wearer to the status of a deity after death. Oliveira (2016) also mentions its purpose in the world of the living: it was worn by the priests responsible for embalming the dead. In this particular ritual, the mask not only invoked the power of Anubis, the god of mummification, but also served the practical purpose of protecting its wearer from both the odors that emanated from the bodies and the potentially toxic substances used for such procedure. During the current pandemic, we do not see embalmers, but funeral agents and gravediggers dressed in full gear in an attempt to protect themselves against the virus (Figure 01). Likewise, bodies are not embalmed, but sealed off in plastic bags and placed in closed urns, often without a funeral ceremony or any proper farewell ritual for family members who are left behind. In fact, many of them are buried in mass graves.



Figure 01: Gravediggers use personal protective equipment (PPE) during the burial of COVID-19 victims.
Source: MOTTA, 2020.

In China, the wearing of masks dates back to ancient times and is a part of its tradition. There are historical records that confirm that they have been doing so for at least 3.500 years B.P. (before present). Masks were associated with religious and healing rituals, New Year's Eve celebrations, and art (i.e., opera and theater). Currently, China is the largest producer of protective masks and is perhaps one of the most advanced countries in terms of their widespread use of masks as a public health measure, even before the pandemic. Given that pollution is a major urban problem and the existence of almost 150 cities with over a million inhabitants, the Chinese have long incorporated the use of masks into their daily lives, considering them as an essential means of protection against pollutants and viruses.

In ancient Greece, the mask was not used to conceal one's identity. It was *prosopon* or the "face" displayed to the public gaze that everyone could look at (ALTUNA, 2009). The Greeks did not perceive the mask as an instrument of concealment, but of identification and representation. Moreira (1994) stated that it nullified the personality/identity of the actor and holds a great deal of symbolism, as it conveyed one's human category, social class, or heroic status. Nowadays, it still somewhat serves the same purpose during the pandemic, especially in the hospital "battlefields," where the *prosopon* identifies the protagonists who are in the front line of fight against the coronavirus (e.g., doctors, nurses, and other health professionals), often with insufficient supplies. The professionals fighting at the front of this battle—who, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), are required to wear individual protection equipment at all times (i.e., which includes a mask)—often already identify themselves as characters destined for defeat, by force of circumstances brought on by the contemporary drama that has become the pandemic provoked by SARS-CoV-2. This is demonstrated in the excerpt below:

Frontline workers face considerable danger because by directly working with patients, health professionals susceptible to a multitude of viruses and can consequently become seriously ill. Complaints have been spreading across the country. The [Brazilian] Federal Council of Nursing has already received almost 3,600 complaints about the scarcity and poor quality of personal protective equipment such as masks, gloves, and aprons. (G1-GLOBO, 2020 - author's translation).

The iconic masks of tragedy and comedy in Greek theater are often associated with the birth of theatre through the festival of Dionysus. The inception of Greek tragedy and its masks is attributed to Thespis of Ikaria and/or Aeschylus during the 6th century BC, but such authorships are polemic (THEATRONS, 2020; LYCEEDADULTES, 2020). Etymologically, the word "tragedy" is derived from *tragōidia*, which means "ode/song to the goat," referring to a ritual for Dionysus wherein the act of animal sacrifice was accompanied by singing.

In theatrical terms, tragedies are representations, oftentimes related to mythology, with free textual interpretation implying political and metaphysical issues. A common theme of this theatrical genre was "to depict mythological characters as victims of fate and fatality." (LYCEEDADULTES, 2020, author's translation) Tragedies roused a cathartic feeling in which viewers were able to identify with the characters, possessing "the same passions of the characters, (...) and free themselves from them." (LYCEEDADULTES, 2020, author's translation)

With respect to the circumstances surrounding COVID-19, one can consider tragedy as a staging that "spectacularizes" the masks of power. At this time of pandemic, representatives of the upper political class put on and remove their preventive masks, often in a burlesque manner, to respond to interviews and wander about in the crowd in a show of petty politics. They wear masks to portray an image of being "God-fearing," "just like everyone else, "defenders of (economic) order and of the Constitution", among other things. In the ministries, health departments, hospital boards, new faces come and go as if the people were simply changing masks. These masks of power have incited an outburst of passion among spectators who either defend or condemn social distancing. These sentiments can originate from one party and/or political faction or another, or even among leaders who implement measures/decrees that prescribe or proscribe the use of these protective gear in certain spaces (e.g., public spaces, religious temples, commercial establishments, prisons, etc.). The said measures/decrees are not necessarily anchored in scientific data, but rather from ideological, political, and possibly religious inclinations. This raises the questions: who will end up as the sacrificial scapegoat in the midst of these disputes? Will it be the privileged classes in their occupation of public spaces through "tragic motorcades"? Or the popular segments of the population, who are squeezed into public transportation, segregated in the favelas, left helpless on the streets, and whose daily lives are marked by all sorts of deprivation, expressing the characteristic socio-spatial inequality in Brazilian society?

On the other hand, in comedy, which is etymologically derived from *kōmōidia* (a reference to satirical poetry) or a "song to the cosmos" (STUDYLIBFR, 2020). The failings of human life and society are set in motion, along with caricatured satires of public figures. Its

origins are attributed to Aristophanes in the 5th century and its main objective was, and still is, to provoke laughter; accordingly, the masks were designed to have exaggerated and ridiculous features (THEATRONS, 2020; ESPACEFRANCAIS, 2020; LYCEEDADULTES, 2020). If tragedy sought to evoke a cathartic feeling through fear, comedy aimed to "spread awareness regarding current issues through humor" (STUDYLIBFR, 2020, author's translation). In turn, comedy enables citizens to laugh at those who wear the masks of power and, likewise, those who wear the mask of the pandemic. In the Internet age, this has gone viral globally through memes, which became the main tool for comedic expression. A study conducted by Maria Carolina Avis, a professor of Digital Marketing at the International University Center, UNINTER, found that memes have helped Brazilians deal with the quarantine, precisely because of the amusing content they provide. However, the findings also indicate that memes often outnumber strictly informative content in social media (34% for the memes, as opposed to 17% for informative content). This is not meant to undermine the role of such humorous content on circulating information. Contrarily, Avis states: "although memes are a fun and casual type of content, they can definitely function as a tool to educate and disseminate quality information by means of casually providing tips and spreading positive messages." (DEOLHONOFUTURO.UNINTER, 2020, author's translation) This has precisely been the case of the use (or misuse) of masks (Figure 02).



Je me fous de qui est votre père, ce rassemblement est illégal.

Figure 02: The Comedy of Memes.
 Source: INTERNET (authors unknown).

Venetian masks are widely popular in Italy. Although their origins could have been much earlier, they are usually stated to have first appeared at the beginning of the 13th century (i.e., in 1204) to the point that by 1268 there was already a decree prohibiting masked people from throwing eggs at windows during the Carnival (BERTRAND, 2013, p. 27). Nowadays, the "plague doctor" is one of the costumes and masks commonly seen during the Venice Carnival (Figure 03). However, it is neither a mask nor a typical Venetian costume, but one created by the French physician Charles de l'Orme in 1619, consisting of a long waterproof tunic, a stick (in order to avoid direct contact with patients), shoes, gloves, and a hat (Figure 04). Glasses were placed over the long beaked-mask stuffed with gauze soaked in essential oils and vinegar, in addition to aromatic herbs, to protect the doctor from the miasma, which was believed to be responsible for spreading the plague (THEMASCHERADE, 2020; MUSEUMSSMUSEES, 2020). A comparison of this "plague doctor" costume and the 17th century PPE shows apparent similarities between the two. It is also worth mentioning that 2020 Carnival from Brazil revelers appropriated culturally the hospital mask to hint at the coronavirus, when the pandemic was nothing more than a distant reality to Brazilians. They transformed it into costume element (Figure 05), which will probably remain as a trend in next year's Carnival—however, it would be difficult to imagine that this would carry on for four centuries, as the "plague doctor" costume did.



Figure 03: Plague Doctor Costume at the Venice Carnival

Source: BAUER, 2016.



Figure 04: Plague Doctor outfit showcased at Notre-Dame à Rosa Hospital
Source: VAUBAN, 2018.



Figure 05: "Coronavirus Costume" hospital mask
Source: SOUZA, 2020.

While it is possible to list the countless uses and functions attributed to masks throughout history and their "geographicity," the scope of this text does not allow us the luxury to do so. The study aims to prove that it is not possible to speak of *mask* while excluding their space-time characteristics, as well as their symbolic, dramatic, and communicational significance. Despite the meaning attributed to the mask by its creator—that is, the original idea behind it—it is known that it "acquires autonomy in form and begins to exist independently of its creator, without, however, losing the direct relationship with our sensitivity, intelligence, and cultural baggage," as suggested by Dani (1990, p. 83). Thus, in contrast to the "ritualistic" societies (i.e., that follow a circular timeline that returns to ground zero after each cycle) previously discussed in this section, this day and age is home to industrial societies with significantly particular symbolic references. Klintowitz states that time is both historical and progressive—"wherein the posterior always succeeds the previous" (1986, p.14). This perspective has prompted assertions/suppositions, either backed by experts or reported by the media, that the world will not be the same after the pandemic. That is, we will never return to the ground zero of January 10, 2020, the day before the first officially recorded death attributed to the coronavirus. In Brazil, will masks be adopted as daily protective gear in public and shared private spaces, as is the case in certain Eastern societies? What new forms of global health protocols will be implemented?

Guerre des masques: Save yourself!

Looking at the current situation, wherein protection against a common invisible enemy that threatens all individuals is necessary, the growing imposition (or recommendation) of the use of masks on the entire population has a tendency to directly affect not only public health, but also the economy, politics, urban dynamics, socialization, the establishment of social hierarchies, and the deepening of inequalities. Given the lack of information regarding the unfolding and duration of the pandemic, it is equally difficult to predict whether the wearing of masks will remain as a guideline or a hygienic/precautionary social habit, as it already is in other countries (e.g., China and Japan). The said countries use them as a means of protection from illnesses (i.e., colds, flu, allergies, and pneumonia), social distancing, or even a fashion accessory (therefore, associated with the fashion market).

The Brazilian Ministry of Health first strongly suggested the use of masks to contain the pandemic during around the third week of exponential growth in the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths, following (perhaps too late) similar policies in other countries. Up until this point, only health and safety professionals and infected patients were recommended to do so. However, this guideline must be considered along with the fact that the manufacturers were barely able to meet the demand of the health services, making the universalization of large-scale access of the population to such equipment unthinkable. Additionally, because Brazil depended heavily on imported masks, it was forced to enter the global scramble that the French dubbed as the *guerre des masques* (war for masks).

This unofficial war, declared without any clear rules, pits countries against each other to compete for an item that had become extremely valuable. This led some governments to adopt extreme measures, such as the confiscation of goods, competitive bidding (transforming the mask market into an auction-type business where the highest bidders take it all), and the implementation of laws that allow production to be concentrated to exclusively meet the demands of the domestic market. The most representative example of this is the USA, where Trump implemented the Defense Production Act of 1950—which was already expected due to his highly pushed America First policy). This move was seen as having a total lack of sympathy or, at least, concern for the situation of countries that have traditionally been US allies, as well as global public health as a whole. Once again, this global war against the coronavirus goes to show that the USA has the most important thing that guarantees access to PPEs, respirators, and test kits: money. However, the resources obtained through what has been even deemed on the media as "modern-day piracy" have not really been able to make Americans less vulnerable to the dangers posed by the virus. In this regard, New York was the most devastated state, propelling the USA to have the highest number of cases and deaths in the world. This not only highlighted the fragility and issues of the non-universality of its health system, but also the rampant drastic inequality in the world's largest economic power. Furthermore, a strategic error occurred, which was perhaps motivated by the underestimation of COVID-19's communicability, mortality rate, and impact on public health: from the period of January to February 2020, the U.S. exported the equivalent of USD17.6 million in fans and protective equipment to China, when they only exported USD 1.4 million during the same period in 2019 (EILPERIN et al., 2020).

Another significant economic change was the shift in focus by some companies in terms of production. This was not only done by those that voluntarily decided to maintain productivity levels in the face of the crisis, but by others that, by virtue of laws and decrees, or even acting in accordance with government guidelines, had to make changes in their production chain. Certain companies ceased to manufacture products such as automotive equipment, smartphones, clothing, and disposable diapers and shifted their production to respirators, masks, and other PPE equipment. This is capitalism "reinventing itself" in the midst of a new crisis.

In the informal market, masks also present themselves as an income alternative for ordinary citizens. Given the exponential increase in the number of cases throughout the country and the increasing demand for protection; and pursuant to the guidelines of the WHO, the Brazilian Ministry of Health, or state and municipal governments, access to homemade masks has become the only alternative for the majority. In a press conference held on April 1, the former Brazilian Minister of Health, Luis Henrique Mandetta, said: "Anyone can make their own cloth mask and wear it, which will help the health system." In the same interview, he emphasized the low production cost of such accessories. This led to a boost in the production and sale of masks through the informal economy. Workers whose livelihoods have been impacted—housemaids, informal vendors, food stalls workers, seamstresses, among many others—saw this as a potential additional source of income, and went on to producing and selling homemade masks—with various patterns

or logos of soccer teams, samba schools, and beer brands—to cater to a wide range of consumers. In the city of Rio de Janeiro, the Municipal Guard also extends significant tolerance regarding informal workers who are technically illegally occupying the public space to sell cloth masks. Therefore, in the context of COVID-19, masks serve as somewhat of a “buffer” for these families at a time of low morale amidst ever-increasing unemployment rates.

Bal Masqué - resignifying the masks in times of pandemic

Departing from politics and economics, it can be said that the relationships between city dwellers have also suffered considerably due to the pandemic. Cities, especially great metropolises, have apparently led their inhabitants to develop particular defense mechanisms, which were discussed and analyzed in depth by Simmel (2005) and Wirth (1973): impersonality, indifference, skepticism, and a blasé attitude. People make themselves anonymous and develop a rationality that allows them to be physically close, but emotionally distant. Faces are no longer distinguishable in a crowd and everyone becomes part of a shapeless (or uniform?) mass. If the “big city” already prompts such behavior—or, as Simmel would say, “mental attitudes”—on its inhabitants, one can only imagine the effect of the constant sight of covered or masked faces would have. Simmel adds that: “the subject has to come to terms with it entirely for themselves, their self-preservation in the face of the large city demands from them a no less negative behavior of a social nature” (2005, p. 582). Furthermore, Carlos observed that the media shows the faces of the dead to replace the impersonality of numbers; however, the author warns that this “[...] is still insufficient. Despite stirring up sympathy for the isolated and humanizing an individualistic society that lives under the concept of ‘mass hedonism,’ the faces of the crisis are not so literal” (CARLOS, 2020, p. 1).

Apart from festivals or special celebrations (e.g., the Carnival, the traditional catholic celebration *Folia de Reis*, the horseback riding festival *Cavallhada*, etc.), the wearing of masks is not common in Brazilian cities. In other contexts, masks have been used by bandits or members of criminal factions when committing crimes or by the police to protect their identity. They have also become commonplace in demonstrations, such as those that took place in 2013. During one such occasion, “black blocs,” dressed in black clothing while covering their faces, expressed the widespread feeling of contempt for the state and neoliberal economic policies through tactics generally considered as “violent” and “anarchic,” and a symbolic attack on institutions. In any case, there is a strong association between masks and partying, violence, and/or fear in every domain mentioned in this paper.

An enemy that is imperceptible to the naked eye breeds general mistrust; people grow suspicious of others because they are unsure of whether there is an infected individual behind the mask—or simply someone taking extra precaution. Thus, Eco claims that masks have a “communicative value” or send a certain “signal” (1989, p.15). It is our opinion that the masks used against the coronavirus also assume these values, being

resignified in public, collective, and even domestic spaces. In these spaces for ordinary, daily life, masks serve as both protective equipment and a public health guideline, but are also part of one's outfit as an essential accessory to access public places, altering its original intended purpose. In this regard, the reference made by Eco to the *skinsuits* worn by primitive men is exemplary, demonstrating how clothing can assume a distinctive potential—which is already true for masks:

He was cold and so he covered himself, no doubt about it. There was also no doubt that within a few days of the invention of the first fur suit, a distinction will have been created between the good hunters, armed with their furs acquired as a reward for a grueling fight, and all the other hunters, who are unfit and furless. It does not take much imagination to picture the social circumstances in which the hunters would have put on their furs, not to protect themselves from the cold, but to prove that they belonged to the dominant class. (ECO, 1989, p. 15)

The scarcity of masks is a fact. As previously mentioned, their dispute, even in a global scale, is a harsh reality. If available on the market at all, the prices of masks marketed as being the most effective protection against the invisible enemy reaches abusive levels, going for 200 Brazilian Reals (40 US Dollar) a piece. These three elements, either individually or as a whole, are enough to differentiate the "good hunters" from the "unfit/unfed." Not taking into account the strict health environments (e.g., hospitals and clinics), people will most likely be recognized/discriminated in public and shared private spaces depending on the type of mask they use, or if they opt not to wear one. The "good hunters" will be those with greater financial resources who are able to invest a few hundred Reals to gain constant access to more effective protective equipment. Meanwhile, others must get by with "adapting", making do with "grassroots solutions", "domestic solutions," and "creativity," which often results in protection that is not always as effective. However, there are also those who do not have these alternatives available to them, those who are socially relegated to invisibility or, at best, deemed "unfit" and "vulnerable". The homeless and those living on the streets fall under this classification, and are automatically categorized as "unmasked." If they were already considered a nuisance before the pandemic, they would most probably stir up greater feelings of repulsion, fear, and horror from the "masked ones" as "unmasked" individuals and be perceived as potential "carriers" of the disease. On the other hand, asymptomatic individuals wearing masks can be considered to possess the "civil inattention" proposed by Goffman (2010), which is characterized by fearlessness and avoidance (including "looking at").

This allows us to treat the mask as an article of clothing during the pandemic, with the understanding that, as proposed by Thieme and Eicher (1987), dressing encompasses the material form, the act of dressing, and its sociocultural significance. As a material form, we have the physical mask itself, its practical use, and its intended function in relation to public health. The act of dressing corresponds to mask production and procurement, as well as to the limits set by various hierarchies of governments

regarding the failure to wear masks in public and communal spaces. Finally, sociocultural significance includes a mask's ability to serve as an indicator of an individual's position in society, regarding their possibility of acquiring this artifact, or even in the way subjects deal with the pandemic, as previously suggested. This concept of dressing developed by Eicher and her colleagues frames the proposed discussion. Accordingly, Melchior remarks:

Eicher's concept of dress as body supplements and body modifications also change the focus from the material things that clothes the body to bodily practices, both grooming and hygienic practices, and the role dress plays in social interaction. With this definition, dress is a multi-sensory phenomenon, engaging the senses of hearing, touch and smell as well as vision ... (MELCHIOR, 2008, p. 3).

Thus, in its multi-sensory expression, the mask dresses us expressing a new fear during the pandemic.

"Barred at the Ball"² - prohibitions, recommendations, and appropriations regarding the use of masks in urban space

In June 2013, legal measures were taken to curb the wearing of masks by demonstrators when major demonstrations took place in several Brazilian cities (Figure 06). As a result, Law 6.528/2013 was passed in the city of Rio de Janeiro. It supplemented Article 23 of the State Constitution and indicated in Article 2, regarding the "public meeting for the manifestation of thought," that "the use of masks or any other form facial concealment for the purpose of evading identification is strictly prohibited." (RIO DE JANEIRO, 2013) Congressman Dionisio Lins previously presented Bill 1239/2008 to the Legislative Assembly of the State of Rio de Janeiro (ALERJ) in 2008, which aimed to prohibit the sale of *Clóvis* or *Bate Bola* costumes (Figure 07). He claimed that these costumes, which are commonly worn in the suburbs and metropolitan periphery of Rio de Janeiro, made it difficult for authorities or other parties to identify its wearers (RIO DE JANEIRO, 2008a); therefore, only children are permitted to wear such masks. Congressman Paulo Melo, the reporting Congressman on the ALERJ's Constitution and Justice Commission project, argued that the bill was unconstitutional and noted that, among other things, such a bill would prohibit "a mask that is an expression of Rio de Janeiro's Carnival culture and sustains mask businesses in Halloween, an imported cultural expression." (RIO DE JANEIRO, 2008b)

² In Brazil, the expression "barred at the ball" means to be compulsorily prevented from entering or staying in a certain space.



Figure 06: Protests in Rio de Janeiro: "black blocs"
Source: PAIVA, 2013.



Figure 07: *Clóvis (Bate Bola)*, Rio de Janeiro Carnival, 2020
Source: AUTHORS' PHOTO, 2020.

Nowadays, the use of masks is once again at the center of great controversy. On May 19, 2020, the plenary of the House of Representatives approved the basic text that served as the foundation of the bill that required the wearing of masks in public and private places during the public health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (AGENCIA BRASIL, 2020). Furthermore, it stated that offenders will be charged with criminal sanctions or fines ranging from R\$300 to R\$600, in addition to denied access to certain public and shared private spaces. However, in early July, the public was surprised by the vetoes of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro on certain passages/articles of Law 14.019/2020, which involves the mandatory use of masks in public spaces. Some of these vetoes were about the mandatory wearing of masks in prisons, public agencies and entities, businesses, industries, religious temples, educational institutions, and other closed places where people gather (AGENCIA SENADO, 2020).

Regarding the WHO made two notable warnings mainly directed at the general population. The first one deals with the proper use of medical masks:

The use of medical masks in the community may divert this critical resource from the health workers and others who need them the most. In settings where medical masks are in short supply, **medical masks should be reserved for health workers and at-risk individuals when indicated.** (World Health Organization, 2020a, p. 8, Highlights by the original author)

The second warning (Figure 08), which is presented in a screenshot for documentation purposes, objectively addresses a difficulty faced by majority of the population—the proper use of non-medical cloth masks.



Figure 08: Use of "homemade masks" for protection against COVID-19 according to the WHO

Source: WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, 2020b.

The Brazilian Ministry of Health also advised the public on how to stay protected against COVID-19. Regarding the use of masks, it recommends: "Use homemade or handmade fabric masks when leaving your home." (MINISTERIO DA SAUDE, 2020)

Although the use of masks does not guarantee safety from contamination by the virus—thus providing its wearer with a false sense of security—its compulsory use creates new meanings to those areas that are forbidden to certain individuals/segments of society. Needless to say, non-compliance occurs and the justifications of offenders include discomfort, rhinitis, and forgetfulness, to name a few. The imposition of stricter sanctions will not be an issue for individuals who have no problem acquiring these items. As they say, people will only follow once they feel the pinch. On the other hand, more severe prohibitions may promote the segregation or banishment from the city streets of a particular category of unmasked individuals comprised of those who have already been historically segregated/discriminated against in urban spaces. They are the homeless street dwellers who are seen as a stain, a nuisance, and a wound of society.

Ever since, evacuation strategies that come in the form of hostile architecture, have been proliferating in certain cities around the world—especially in the wealthiest areas—in an effort to prevent/halt the access and permanence of these people in certain spaces. For instance, benches with partitions, which prevent an individual from lying down, have become increasingly common. Cox and Cox (2015, p. 11) also note "empty urban surfaces that could potentially be occupied by the street population, such as window sills, gardens, walls, covered areas underneath bridges or overpasses, among others, that are saturated with elements that cause suffering to the body." Hostile architecture already sends the message; there is no need for signs or the physical enclosure of these areas, or for security guards to prevent access—although, in some cases, all of these measures are still taken.

When these people are branded with yet another stigma of being the "unmasked ones" apart from being homeless or classified as a street dweller, verbal warnings and prohibitions become generalized, materialized in warnings through signs, police intervention, or ultimately, their compulsory removal from the space for non-fulfillment of rules. Like the aforementioned benches, these, who are already somewhat familiar with what Flusty (1997) considers as "prickly spaces," must now deal with "jittery spaces" due to their inability to wear masks. These spaces are kept under constant surveillance—either by cameras, security personnel (public or private), or by the population in general—which is guided by the public power to monitor guideline compliance for combating the pandemic, including the creation of "agglomeration hotlines." By not having masks, they not only tarnish the landscape of a city that wants to sell itself and attract tourists by portraying itself as immaculate, but are also turned into public health cases. The pandemic tends to once again strip social issues of its political character, transforming the COVID-19 into a "police case" while also explaining its spatial dimension. To the same extent, "dangerous classes" also tend to be highlighted. Bauman provides an in-depth description of this process:

The original "dangerous classes" were made up of the temporarily excluded and not as yet reintegrated population surplus, which accelerating economic progress had deprived of a "useful function", while the accelerating pulverization of networks of bonds had stripped them of protection. [...] The new "dangerous class", on the other hand, are those recognized as *unfit* for reintegration and proclaimed to be unassimilable, since no useful function can be conceived for them to perform after "rehabilitation". They are not just excessive, but *redundant*. They are excluded *permanently*. (BAUMAN, 2009, p. 22. Highlights by the original author).

In the context of COVID-19, such classes that lack adequate means to protect themselves from the virus and, thus, cannot be assimilated, are automatically denounced as carriers of the disease and become its greatest victims. Although the general consensus is that the virus is egalitarian in its ability to infect all people evenly, regardless of social class, there are certain groups and areas in the city, which are more conducive to the spread of the contagion and also have a higher mortality rate. Reasons for this include the inaccessibility to basic protection against such a lethal adversary, as well as the lack of government investment in public health.

Even the USA, the world's largest economy with the highest official death toll due to COVID-19 (as of July 11, 2020), has taken some rather controversial measures; one of them was released on March 31 to much criticism, both within and outside the country:

To prevent the transmission of the new coronavirus, a Las Vegas parking lot, United States, was transformed into an outdoor "dormitory" for homeless people. This measure, which was highly criticized in social media, was taken due to the closure of a public shelter after one of the regulars was confirmed to be infected by COVID-19. (UOL NEWS, 2020).

There has been a noticeable shift in the behavior of street dwellers, particularly those who cling to "adapting" strategies (e.g., asking for money from passers-by to buy food, approaching restaurant owners to request leftovers, peddling used items, etc.) in order to remain in the city. A change is occurring both on their part and on the people they come in contact with. As the fear of contagion grows, there has been a clear attempt of those who travel in the streets to distance themselves from those who live on the street by switching sidewalks when their paths cross. On the other hand, instead of asking for money for food, some of the street dwellers simply ask people to buy a *capinha* (an expression, which roughly translates to "little cape," and is used in Rio de Janeiro to refer to a mask), perhaps as a way of saying that the citizens would not be able to survive in the urban space without the masks.

Final Reflections: Doubts and hesitations

In the daily struggle that has become COVID-19, the world's population continues move forward—either adrift or anchored in scientific and technological findings—toward a masked and uncertain future. Will we discover a vaccine that will effectively prevent the spread of the virus? How long will social isolation measures last and how will they affect us? Will the pandemic have the power to make us reevaluate life and death, social inequality, our respect for nature, empathy, and solidarity? What marks will the masks—which have always had their place throughout history—leave on the 21st century? Moving forward, what strategies will we adopt in public and shared private spaces? Will we choose to be dressed as good hunters or unfit ones?

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Rosemere Maia

Full-time Professor at the School of Social Work of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

She has a PhD in Geography from Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and has completed senior/post-doctoral Internships in the University of Coimbra, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, and Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro. Institutional Address: Escola de Serviço Social. Av. Pasteur, 250/fundos, Praia Vermelha, Rio de Janeiro- Rio de Janeiro- Brasil. CEP 22290-902

ORCID 0000-0001-5053-9571

Email: rosemaia@terra.com.br

Carlos Eduardo S. Maia

Full-time Professor at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora/Human Sciences Institute/Department of Geography.

He has a PhD in Geography from UFRJ and has received senior/post-doctoral training from Sorbonne Paris IV.

Institutional Address: UFJF/ICH/DEGEO. Campus Universitário, Rua José Lourenço Kelmer, s/n, São Pedro, Juiz de Fora – Minas Gerais – Brasil. CEP 36036-900

ORCID 0000-0002-2035-4362

Email: calrmaia@uol.com.br

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