Securitization of the Health and Economy in the COVID Times

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Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak around the world triggered an unprecedented sequence of events with international, regional and national implications in health and economy public-policies. However, this is not the first-time humankind experiences such pandemics. Since the outbreak of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) 18 years ago, a series of coronaviruses (SARSr-CoV) have been discovered (Zhou et al, 2020).

COVID-19 is not a new phenomenon in the international system, which is increasingly affected by the emergence and re-emergence of the virus or other diseases propagated by human contact with infected people or animals (Morens and Fauci, 2013). According to Woodward et al (2001, p.875), there is "[…] an increasing tension between the new rules, actors and markets that characterize the modern phase of globalization and the ability of countries to protect and

promote health."

These health phenomena represent the globalization cross-border flows with great impact on societies, including how the threat is perceived and the way of dealing with this issue in terms of health and economic national and international security (Woodward et al.,2001).

To deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, international and national public agents had to shift the debate and actions from the health and economic realms towards the security one, which reflects a more stringent reaction to "combat" or "raging war against the virus and its effects in the economy" (we have used the commas here to indicate the representative discursive practices of the authorities as reflected in the media). This discursive practice is called securitization, an ontological and epistemological change that labels a phenomenon originally from the public arena to the security/military realm, which the main implication is the relativization of human rights and other democratic mechanisms that are not accepted easily by Western societies without emergencies such as pandemics.

Therefore, considering that the emergence and resurgence of diverse strains of the coronavirus have been known by health authorities for a long time, why have public health planning and actions at the international and national levels failed to contain the epidemic? Why securitize a topic that could already have been controlled in the scope of politics?

The debate to what extent the societies are willing to allow the relativization of human rights and the democratic mechanisms is essential to bring what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls "a novel clarity" that according to him: "[…]pandemic clarity and the apparitions it brings to light. The things it allows us to see and the way in which they are interpreted and assessed will determine the future of the civilization in which we live".

The Framework of Securitization: health and economy as referential objects

Securitization, a narrative political process

Barry Buzan in People, *States & Fear* indicates that the concept of security is very problematic because it presents elements of moral, ideological and normative nature that hinder its investigation and empirical recognition. Buzan (2007) points that with the end of the Cold War, many processes of a social nature began to challenge the role of the State and its concerns in the sphere of high politics. Concerns such as immigration, decolonization processes, major environmental accidents, expansion of the activities of transnational companies, growing economic and financial interdependence and pandemics impregnated the agenda of civil society (along with the emergence of new actors in the international realm), putting pressure into the international political agenda to incorporate them in the debates and decision-making processes related to security.

There is no doubt that health security is a dimension of impact on international security, however, one dimension that is lost in this debate on it is the question of the discourse that we want to incorporate as security, and, therefore, a theme that The State must assume as part of high politics, or in other words, the securitization of topics of interest. Therefore, a question that must be constant is: who is interested in the discourse that securitizes health?

Securitizing a given theme in international politics means applying a political process that places the referential object in a special or urgent position that demands an immediate response from the State. According to Buzan, Waever and De Wilde (1998, p. 24), this approach means "[...] that something is designated as an international security issue because it can be argued that this issue is more important than other issues and should take absolute priority."

Thus, the referent object of security has to be staged as an existential threat by the State to generate the endorsement by society of emergency measures beyond the law that would be rejected, which are followed by extra-budgetary reallocation to combat the threat (Buzan, Waever and De Wilde, 1998, p. 21).

Health and Economy as Referential Objects for Securitization

Discourses and practices at the international and national level on health securitization assume characteristics that shape the behavior of institutions, which spill-over on other issues of the political agenda such as economy, trade, intellectual property, investments, among others. We observe a causal chain in which the nature of the rapid expansion of infectious diseases in the globalized world poses a threat to individuals, populations and States that lead to a serious burden of the disease on social, political, economic and military dimensions, thus, increasing the threat (Feldbaum et al., 2006; Rushton and Youde, 2014)

As a result of this causal chain, the focus on health security inducing containment and surveillance of the disease makes the dimension of prevention disappear, thus, places a strong protective layer on borders and national interest such as the attempt of the United States to make COVID-19 to be known as the “Chinese virus”, which tends to impact negatively human rights (Rushton and Youde, 2014; Hornung, 2016).

The spill-over in economic dimension as the consequence of heath security becomes a securitization process itself, however, in this over the economy. The need to adopt "emergency stances" and "increasing spending" are narratives very common to this state-of-affairs.

The abnormality during the pandemic justifies the license to public agents in the decision-making processes to skip legal rules “for a greater good”. The rational of securitization is to escape the “bonds” of the budgetary laws, and the scrutiny and debates about the opportunity, efficiency, and pertinence of spending public money**.**

Therefore, securitizing health and economy are what Weaver (2011) called the panic politics, in which (1) certain public policy matters become confidential or protectionists based on the Raison d´État rationale; (2) the constitutional rights and guarantees are suppressed; and (3) additional powers are conferred on public officials. Let´s be reminded that this is an announced tragedy as the State does not consider in the sanitary public policies the emergence and re-emergence of virulent diseases.

The health crisis faced is unprecedented. As such, according to the IMF, "It is very likely that this year the global economy will experience its worst recession since the Great". It is estimated by that the global economy "is expected to contract sharply by -3% in 2020, which already makes it", which is far more severe than the financial crisis of 2008-2009. For this reason, the IMF projects even more worrying scenarios of the epidemic, according to the estimated time of its overcoming, as well as the possibility of a new wave of the disease in 2021.

Considering the uncertainty about the duration and intensity of the shock, the so-called "normal" economic policies in times of crisis is not possible. In general, government officials encourage economic activity with measures like encouraging consumption and the increase of jobs, with tax relief, for instance.

It is also admitted that the economies of developing countries and emerging markets will be hit harder, considering several factors such as weak health systems, which will make international cooperation essential, reinforcing financial assistance to these countries. According to a well-known phenomenon, commodity prices are volatile, especially oil, metals, and natural gas.

For example, as soon as the pandemic started to produce important effects in Brazil, the government has enacted the law 13.979/20, which in its article 4 states: "Bidding for the acquisition of health goods, services and supplies destined to cope with the public health emergency is waived […]. " Also, the law in its article 3 declares:

To deal with the public health emergency of international importance due to the coronavirus, the following measures may be adopted, among others:

VI - exceptional and temporary restriction on entering and leaving the country, according to technical and reasoned recommendation by the National Health Surveillance Agency (Anvisa), by highways, ports or airports;

VII - requisition of goods and services from natural and legal persons, in which case the subsequent payment of a fair indemnity will be guaranteed; and

VIII - exceptional and temporary authorization for the import of products subject to health surveillance without registration with Anvisa. (our translation)

It is important to note that government officials have been adopting strict policies to face crises. In the scope of health services, there is an exponential increase in public spending due to several factors. In addition to the increase in demand, the supply of protective equipment and other necessary supplies, in addition to medicines, has been suffering a continuity solution. Thus, the global scarcity of supplies is also the justification for some government officials to justify their acquisition at the necessary price, even if it is not fair. Also, the procedures for contracting and purchasing such pieces of equipment will probably be made without legal care, due to urgency, currently amounting to an estimated R$ 703.6 million with no competition among enterprises.

Conclusion

A real reflection by international society should be made so that the effects of the pandemic crisis do not go forgotten in the future (Morens and Fauci, 2013). Besides, higher agility in information is essential to any country that is aware of infectious disease, so the need to resort to urgent or not ordinary decisions by the State is mitigated to protect human rights.

In Brazil we observe news popping up regarding the misuse of public funds, and corruption connected to the lack of transparency and urgent need to spend during the outbreak, which is a clear sign that public policy strategy and

preparation is preferable to securitization.

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