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## **When the (face)mask slips: politics, performance and crisis in urban Brazil**

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### **Abstract:**

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, masks and the act of masking have become emotive subjects for social and political debate. In Brazil, one of the countries most severely affected by the pandemic, the seemingly mundane act of mask-wearing has become part of a deep social, political and economic crisis at the centre of which is the far-right president Jair Bolsonaro. In this paper we explore the politics of (un)masking in Brazil from three vantage points in which the mask serves to dramatise the country's current moment. Firstly, we trace the connections and disjunctions between the politics of mask-wearing and the genealogies of hygienist policies associated with the modern aspirations of the Brazilian republic. Secondly, we consider how masks are incorporated into the everyday life of the city through popular economies, which reveal the potentialities and limitations of work beyond the modern ideals of waged labour. Finally, we explore the incorporation of masks in urban street-art. We approach graffiti and murals as situated performances of symbolic resistance that contest and reveal the incoherences of Bolsonaro's anti-science discourse. In tandem, these three perspectives foreground practices of (un)masking that expose long-standing tensions and new contemporary challenges that characterise the politics of a "crisis society."

**Keywords:** Masks, Brazil, COVID-19, popular economy, public health, street art

*Every Mask is part of an event, which can only be intelligible when understood as a performance with complex interactions between Masks and non-maskers (Tonkin 1979, 243).*

In mid-March 2020, still early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, a video showing president Jair Bolsonaro struggling with his face mask during a press conference brought some comic relief to what was fast becoming a national tragedy. As we write, over one year on, the country has had four Health ministers in quick succession and recorded over 470,000 deaths from COVID-19. With the pandemic taking hold, discontent with Bolsonaro, his policies and antics, has provoked a febrile political environment that is especially evident on the streets of Brazil's major cities. At the end of May 2020, for instance, a demonstration *against* Bolsonaro was called for by the Antifa section of Corinthians football club supporters from São Paulo. Meeting at the usually busy Paulista Avenue, Antifa confronted Bolsonaro supporters, less than a hundred meters separating each group. The football club jerseys of the anti-Bolsonaro protesters were complemented by a new item: cloth face masks bearing the emblems of their teams, Antifa, or pro-democracy slogans. The almost universal wearing of masks and scarves contrasted with the mostly bare faces of Bolsonaro supporters, the majority of whom were dressed in the colours of the *Seleção*, the national football team, and a few carrying neo-Nazi flags and other paraphernalia. Facing-off physically, the two groups clashed symbolically, the face mask an allegory of a wider political drama being re-enacted on the streets of São Paulo.

The politics of mask-wearing has global resonance. Like Bolsonaro, former President Trump was reluctant to endorse wearing masks, or be photographed wearing one because, in his words, he “didn’t want to give the press the pleasure of seeing it” (BBC 2020). Through 2020 masks came to symbolise the divide between Democrats and Republicans, as a rallying cause for libertarians against “big government,” and fertile ground for conspiracy theorists and promoters of fake news.<sup>i</sup> In the UK, masks have been a cipher for the uncertainty of public policy as the government in England anguished for weeks while it tried to reconcile scientific advice to make masks compulsory in certain settings with a political ideology to restrict state intervention. By contrast, since the start of the pandemic, a long list of countries has required face masks to be worn in public and in enclosed spaces outside the home with penalties for non-compliance ranging from warnings, to fines and jail terms.<sup>ii</sup> As noted by Clare Wilkinson (2020),

[m]asks may, by admission of many doctors and health organizations, work better as signs of civic responsibility than as barriers to infection... [the mask] must be understood alongside mask performance as a sign of deference to social order.

The governance of mask-wearing signals how governments frame civic duties; the extent to which enforcement is enshrined in laws and regulations, compared with approaches that stress self-policing and personal responsibility. But, as the Avenida Paulista demonstration indicates, compliance is uneven and politically charged. Decisions to mask and what type to wear invests the mask with a “concentrated symbolism” that can be mobilised to contest civic and political totems (Tonkin 1979, 247).

In Brazil, popular reactions to the pandemic – and to the measures taken to contain its advance – reveal underlying tensions of a politically, socially and economically unequal and divided society. They also reveal the crisis of the Brazilian state founded upon the positivist principles of “order and progress” symbolizing, at least rhetorically, the belief that modernity would promote the rational development of a nation that attempted to distance itself from its colonial past. Associated with industrialisation, urban modernism, and the emergence of a technocracy, successive governments promoted state-led modernisation, later abandoned in favour of a neoliberal pro-market agenda (Caldeira and Holston 2016; Saad-Filho 2020). In the 2000s, an economic boom enabled a process of redistribution that turned around decades of slow growth and rising inequalities. In the following decade, however, a sharp economic slowdown and fiscal crisis, accompanied by a succession of scandals, exposed widespread malfeasance and undermined confidence in political institutions and fuelled widespread discontent. Leading into the pandemic, then, Brazil epitomised what Nancy Fraser (2017) has called the “crisis society” in reference to the systemic, simultaneous and multidimensional crisis engendered by neoliberal capitalism. In Brazil, this crisis came to a head with the election of Bolsonaro, a far-right politician whose platform relied on a combination of authoritarian sympathies, barely concealed expressions of antiblackness and the promotion of an ultra-liberal agenda (da Silva and Larkins 2019; Hunter and Power 2019). Drawing considerable support from evangelical churches, Bolsonaro projected a scepticism bordering on antagonism for science and education, and promoted a populist anti-elite “culture war” that had considerable traction with a working-class base (Almeida 2019; Feltran 2020).

Prompted by Bolsonaro’s relationships with the face mask, in this article we think through the ways that masks reveal the tensions embedded in Brazil as a “crisis society.” In doing so we concur with Rachel Sugar (2020) that “[m]asks mean something is wrong.” But, we stress how the mask serves as a creative resource that is simultaneously a mundane object and a prop to represent a range of social, political and economic dilemmas. We argue that, as shown in the clash between pro- and anti-Bolsonaro protesters on Paulista Avenue, the use and meanings of face masks re-animate issues and divisions that pre-date COVID-19 but which have become magnified by the pandemic.

The paper is organised in two main parts. Part one discusses academic treatments of masks, noting debates on their role to disguise, transform or display identities. Part two

turns to contemporary Brazil in order to analyse how masks have become part of the repertoire of crisis, which we examine from three perspectives, or subsections. Bolsonaro's inconsistent use of masks provides the first, focusing on the biopolitics of public health policy. Whereas aspirations for a hygienic modernity have previously guided the coercive action of the state against marginalised sectors of society, Bolsonaro's unmasked face communicates an affective proximity to his supporters while his denialism leaves these same sectors to their own fate. The second perspective considers the temporalities of popular economies as they respond to a growing demand for improvised masks during the pandemic. In a context where the highly-coveted medical-grade face masks are unavailable or unaffordable to most, a variety of do-it-yourself face coverings have quickly emerged. Mandatory mask-wearing and the opportunities to perform political, social and cultural distinctions through design choice have opened a market niche served by street vendors in the popular economy. And the third perspective examines how masks have become perhaps "the" symbol in the representational repertoire of street art during the pandemic. As a metaphor-in-action the mask serves to communicate empathy, sorrow for victims and admiration for health workers, as well as anger, mistrust and defiance against those held responsible for the infection rates and high death toll.

## Masks: Identities, Performance and Politics

Masks do a lot of work. Ubiquitous in popular culture, masks provide a desired-for anonymity – a staple of numerous genres from comic superheroes, to horror, wrestling, erotica, and pornography. The mask can suggest suppressed feelings or hint at emotions that might otherwise be difficult or dangerous to express – the sadness of a clown, the menace of a vigilante, the potential violence of a mob. Masks can be playful, offering opportunities for impersonation and role play, subverting norms of class, race or gender and suggesting that identities are up for grabs – the possibilities of the masked-ball, the flamboyance and ambiguity of carnival, the ritual and subversion of Mardi Gras, the representation of drag, and the racialised inversions of "blackface" and minstrel vaudeville (DaMatta 1991; Johnson 2013; Sawin 2001).<sup>iii</sup> Sociability, then, can be enhanced by masking, enabling the complicity of a crowd, suppressing inhibitions, or it can extend "social distancing," hinder due regard, or offend. Context matters. The presentation of self as masked or unmasked may comply with or threaten authority, and may represent a conscious political act by the wearer or be politicised by others (Lynteris 2018; Pang 2021). Worn "out-of-place" a mask may provoke suspicion; a face veil, for instance, may motivate surveillance of the wearer and trigger calls for "burqa bans" or other prohibitions (Moors 2009; Tabassum 2017).

Social scientists have been intrigued by the different meanings of the mask. As important references to cosmological belief systems and practices, masks are often key

components to ritual, rites of passage, constructing or sustaining social bonds, and marking intra-group hierarchies and interpersonal status (Fuh 2020; Napier 1986; Young-Loughlin and Loughlin 1988). For Lévi-Strauss (1988), masks worked in diacritical relationships with the human face, mediating between the physical and the social self, and between the symbolic and real. He argued that a mask should be understood as a dialogue across generations and with other communities, in which meanings are subject to constant (re)-interpretation. Crucially, then, the mask performs a social function. As Pollock (1995) suggests, masks work to signal identities with reference to existing frames of meaning. But, as products of the human imagination, they are subject to interpretation and their meanings are therefore inherently ambiguous (Napier 1986; Taussig 1999). As Tonkin (1979) puts it, the symbolism of masks embodies forms of power, variously revealing and obscuring peoples' standing and intentions, transforming events, and thus enabling or denying forms of domination. As such, unmasking is an act that can both reveal a "public secret," as to the identity, and power, of the wearer for example, or conversely, deny it (Taussig 1999).

The mask has been a metaphorical device to the conduct of social interaction. As Goffman (1959) argued, in order to achieve social goals people deploy what he called "impression management," carefully controlling the communication of verbal and nonverbal information and hoping that others will associate these cues as authentic expressions of identity.<sup>iv</sup> Social interaction, then, is a dramaturgical exercise involving what Jacobsen and Kristiansen (2015, 73) term a "game of masks," conveying unspoken frames of behaviour through gestures, attitudes, expressions. This gaining "face" was considered by Goffman to be a "positive social value" allowing people to obscure inappropriate traits, views or actions – what he called "unmeant gestures" – that might suggest a different character (Goffman 1959, 128; Khan 2020). Consciously deployed, masking as a presentation of the self captures the bluff of presenting the fake as authentic, the superficial as the profound, the incompetent as professional and legitimate (Newell 2013). The literal and metaphorical mask may occasionally collide when, for example, a health official struggles to put on a face mask undermining the "impression management;" the nonverbal communication threatening the intended communication of professionalism and converting authority into ridicule.

Masks and the process of masking are entangled with wider social and cultural processes. Analysed through the event, the most widely studied is carnival. To Bakhtin (1984), carnival offers a social space in which elite tradition is challenged by folkloric critique. In what he called *carnivalesque*, conventions are broken down, rules are subverted, high culture is mocked as low, the sacred as profane, and vice versa, the lines between performers and crowd blurred, and inhibition and laughter momentarily take over from the prosaic and practical (Bakhtin 1984, 5-15; DaMatta 1991; Sheriff 1999; Vianna 1995).<sup>v</sup> Here, the mask – as well as dress, make-up, deportment, movement and rhythm

– works as an act of communication. Accentuated bodily features, from bulging eyes, hooked nose, gaping mouth and lolling tongue, extended with animalistic referents such as horns, or gender ambiguities, challenges the symbolic repertoires of society's norms (Stallybrass and White 1986, 8-10). For brief moments, the conventional power arrangements between watcher and watched may be unsettled as people embody the character represented by the mask, while watchers are implicitly requested to suspend disbelief and collude with the wearer's projection of a real or assumed identity (Lindahl 1996; Sawin 2001). As a creative device, therefore, the mask affords anonymity, empowering the wearer to cross boundaries, and to take aim at authority through humour, mimicry and satire (Johnson 2013; Lindahl 1996).

It is no accident that explicitly political protests adopt a carnivalesque tactic, in which masks can be subtle, and not so subtle, means for protestors to convey their argument and for states to assert authority through acts of unmasking (Pang 2021). Masks provide a repertoire of signals to the conduct of politics. This repertoire can change with time, and with space, altering the work that masks do and for whom. The anti-Bolsonaro demonstrations described in our opening vignette repeated long-standing tropes established by previous protests. Black coverings or more explicit Antifa symbols were already familiar to many Brazilians from demonstrations in June 2013 that started out as small-scale protests organised against fare increases on public transport, and became an outlet for wider popular discontent. These protests and subsequent demonstrations surrounding the impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff in 2016 were characterised by what Rolnik (2013) calls an "interpretation war" in which protestors approached the streets as performers would a stage. As Nogueira (2017) observed, the demonstrations resembled a *carnival* parade with protestors identifying with distinct rows (*alas*) according to ideological and class lines, marked-out by different chants, clothes and props.<sup>vi</sup> Masks were already a key feature, worn to protect against tear gas and to avoid recognition and persecution. Influenced by social media, many wore Guy Fawkes masks, often accompanied by placards bearing cryptic statements or direct claims to a politician's malfeasance ([Plate 1](#)).<sup>vii</sup> Gathering pace after the 2008 financial crisis and the end of the "commodity boom" that undermined the neo developmentalist model, everyday politics, especially in cities, from both the Left and the Right articulated a pervasive "distrust for large-scale institutions such as multinational corporations, banks and governments" (Gerbaudo 2017, 4), manifest as a deep anger against technocratic government.

## The politics of (un)masking in contemporary Brazil

In the following sections, we examine how the pandemic has un(masked) long-existing tensions and new contemporary challenges in Brazil's "crisis society," characterised by the simultaneity of social, political, economic and ecological crises, which "intersect with and exacerbate one another" (Fraser 2017, 56), revealing the contradictions of the

neoliberal development model. With the current pandemic as the *mise en scène*, the adoption or rejection of face masks serves both as a literal and an allegorical point of entry. As part of measures of pandemic containment, face masks demonstrate compliance with international recommendations on public health and simultaneously broaden the repertoire of resistance against Bolsonaro's government. As a mass reproduced and affordable artisanal product, the sale of face masks has become a common sight on the streets of Brazilian cities. The mask, then, enables both the normalisation of an extraordinary situation, allowing people to get on with everyday lives, and the continuity of the popular – and often precarious – economy. And, as an emergent subject of street art during the pandemic, the mask signals a widely understood social and political critique of scientific scepticism and of Bolsonaro's populism. Graffiti artists and muralists more usually accused of "contaminating" urban space have ironically marked those same spaces with representations of hygiene, care, and civic duty at a time when political and social cohesion is directly, and even deliberately, under threat.

### Politicising the Health Crisis: masks and hygienic modernity

In May 2021, amidst a parliamentary investigation of his government's (mis)handling of the pandemic, Bolsonaro joined a motorbike rally of his supporters through the streets of Rio de Janeiro. The president rode out front wearing an open helmet and no mask. Aerial photos would show a few thousand supporters – most of whom were also not wearing masks. Yet, later that day, Bolsonaro was photographed as he arrived in Ecuador to attend the inauguration of president Guilherme Lasso – wearing the same clothes, but now also a mask. Bolsonaro's inconsistent use of the mask gives a visual dimension to what Ortega and Orsini (2020, 1263) have described as the government's "abdication of responsibility for public health policy," which included the minimisation and denial of the disease, refusal to implement a national lockdown or to support the development (or purchase) of vaccines, as well as promoting "fake news" to substantiate the use of discredited treatments. If, as Jasanoff and Simmet (2017, 756) claim, "one of the hallmarks of modernity was to make truth and knowledge the foundations for exercising political power," then Bolsonaro's variety of populism has tapped into a growing scepticism towards scientific knowledge even, or perhaps especially, in the midst of a public health crisis.

Bolsonaro's politicisation of the current health crisis finds echoes in the past. The most famous example is the 1904 Vaccination Revolt, which erupted following the rumour of a mandatory vaccination programme in Rio de Janeiro, then the federal capital, during a smallpox epidemic. Opposition to the programme proposed by the eminent bacteriologist Dr Oswaldo Cruz organised as the *Liga Contra Vacina Obrigatória* (Anti-Vaccine League) with the aim to stimulate unrest by spreading a heady mix of disturbing truths and exaggerated scare-stories. The League claimed the vaccine infected humans with blood from sick animals, relied on coercion facilitated by the police – under what was known as

the “Torture Code” – and involved mass demolitions and evictions of *cortiços* (multi-family tenements) deemed insalubrious and therefore out-of-place in the idealised Belle Époque city (Hochman 2009; Needell 1987). For nearly one week riots and fighting took place in the streets of Rio. While at first blush a protest against a violently introduced public health measure that challenged social and religious norms the Revolt also brought together a series of political disputes – within the military, among elites alarmed at a rising coffee oligarchy, and labour groups’ discontent with transport, working and living conditions (Needell 1987). At stake was far more than the parameters of public health policy but competing visions of modernisation (Hochman 2009; Leu 2020; Needell 1987).

As illustrated by [Plate 2](#), attention to tropical diseases and hygiene were enmeshed in discussions about the “inherent” dirtiness of the lower classes, ideologies of racial superiority, and aspirations for or resistance to the extension of a modern state. While Dr Oswaldo Cruz is shown to wield a comb over the “Favela,” afflicting especially the working classes and the poor, similar representational work can be traced to the origins of the medical face mask. The mask, as Lynteris observes, was designed both as a protective device and as a “performance of medical reason and hygienic modernity” (2018, 449). Credited to the physician Dr Wu Lien-teh, the mask slowed the advance of the 1910-11 plague in Manchuria and challenged the knowledge of Western science, thereby demonstrating materially and symbolically that China had the “state-organised medical reason and hygienic modernity” to “civilise” its own population and was therefore “modern enough” to rule itself (Lynteris 2018, 446; Peng 2021). In early republican Brazil, still grappling with the legacies of colonialism and slavery, public health policy was a tool of social hygiene, which envisioned the production of a European city in the tropics free from blemishes of race and disease (Bechimol 2008; Leu 2020). Indeed, as described by Garmany and Richmond (2019, 129), hygienisation has been a constant in Brazil’s urban history, as the state has “systematically and violently” displaced low-income people, housing and informal economies in favour of “civilising” or “modernising” narratives over the subsequent century, which most often failed to address underlying inequalities, contributing to their further reproduction.

From this perspective, Bolsonaro’s approach to the current pandemic echoes the Vaccine Revolt in the way citizens’ experiences of uncertainty and exclusion have been instrumentalised for political gain whilst neglecting people’s health needs and leaving underlying inequalities unaddressed. In his resistance to address the current health crisis, the president continuously pits “the people” against “the establishment” – what Lasco (2020) has labelled “medical populism” – to the benefit of his political image. Bolsonaro’s populism has been built around a self-representation as both an extra- and ultra- ordinary man, furthered by a macho pro-family discourse, moral conservatism, authoritarian leaning, and abjection for human rights. These qualities have made him particularly popular with the increasingly relevant Evangelical electorate as well as with other

conservative sectors of society (Almeida 2019). Throughout the pandemic, large Neo-Pentecostal churches have vehemently opposed lockdown measures insisting that faith in God, rather than in science, will protect their followers (Kibuuka 2020). For them, as well as for those in the motorcade, Bolsonaro's rejection of masks becomes part of a complex power performance akin to the traditional role of masks suggested by Tonkin (1979). Here, the performance of masks embodies the paradox of power, expressed in the interaction between the mask-in-action (what Tonkin refers to as "Mask") and those who are unmasked. Bolsonaro's resistance to the mask as a prophylactic measure is a Mask, a performance that communicates his scorn for scientific authority – or, in fact, any authority beyond his own or God's. Yet, by effectively removing a physical barrier (his mask) between himself and his supporters, he presents himself as bravely defying the disease, while siding with those resisting state attempts to control and conform (his Mask). In doing so, Bolsonaro is performing the very crisis of a hygienic modern perspective of the state.

This performance finds its primary stage in cities. Busy avenues provide just the right frame for Bolsonaro's followers to gather and demonstrate their unconditional support for the president. But it is also in cities where disputes around the use of public space – as spaces of sociability and as a source of livelihoods – provide a stage from which to contest public health measures such as social distancing and the use of masks. As Lynteris and Poleykett (2018) remind us, public health policies are inherently biopolitical projects which have been historically met with resistance - a point also illustrated by the history of the medical-mask. In this sense, Bolsonaro's rejection of scientific reason and lockdown measures resonates with the fears of impoverished and racialised urban groups whose income has been threatened by the pandemic. For these populations, face masks provide a new lifeline.

### Surviving the Economic Crisis: masks and the popular economy

Masks have become part of the quotidian landscape worldwide. In the early days of the pandemic, however, governments and health organisations gave out ambiguous and often contradictory messages about the benefits of face masks, partially out of fear that rising demand would affect the availability of protective equipment to health professionals (Howard 2020). While public policy tried to catch up with the science, alternatives to medical-grade masks – from the improvised use of coffee filters, bandannas and sanitary pads, to high-end branded versions – proliferated, as the use of some form of facial covering promised a degree of personal control and "of normality in anything but normal times" (Harms 2020, 1). Artisanal face masks were soon ubiquitous on the high-street and online, sometimes sponsored by media articles providing quasi-scientific description of droplet trajectories. Hailed as an indicator of people taking civic responsibility, the use of DIY face masks was legitimised by governments, who have also celebrated the

conversion of production lines and small workshops to manufacture masks as a sign of dynamic entrepreneurship – even in countries where health and safety regulations would normally prohibit such activity.

In Brazil, the production and distribution of masks and other COVID-19-related products provided an alternative economic opportunity for agile informal entrepreneurs whose livelihoods have been seriously endangered by the pandemic (Santos, Santos and Santos 2020). These workers have learned to rely on improvised and highly dynamic “forms of living” (Millar 2018) that involve fast adaptation to the everyday rhythms of the city. *Ambulantes* (street hawkers) are prime examples of this dynamic. These often-irregular vendors constantly move around searching for clusters of people and avoiding the harassment of inspectors or police that seek to regulate their activity or remove it altogether in the name of urban hygiene and order (Nogueira 2019; Garmany and Richmond 2019). This flexible low-scale economy is quicker to respond to changes in weather, social trends and events, adapting their merchandise faster than formalised businesses. While *ambulantes*’ previously-established spatial-temporal strategies have been partially disrupted by the pandemic and social isolation measures, masks have become a fundamental item for popular economy workers. Masks function both as products for sale and protection for the seller, which enable *ambulantes* to return to the streets and provide the means through which livelihoods are maintained (see [Plate 3](#)). Yet, the shift to the manufacture or sale of face masks is insufficient to compensate for the losses and uncertainty faced by most traders. Official data show that in July 2020 the average income of non-formalised workers had fallen to 72% of pre-pandemic income levels (Carvalho 2020). The situation was attenuated by the *auxílio emergencial* (emergency income support) which, from April to December 2020, had reached 40% of Brazilian households (IBGE 2020). However, circumstances deteriorated in 2021 after the scheme was reinstated following a pause but with much lower benefits and reduced cover. Although the flexibility and adaptability of the popular economy should be recognised and encouraged rather than dismissed by policy makers, the everyday uncertainty of *ambulantes*’ livelihoods is nothing to be celebrated.

The pandemic has unmasked the precarious realities of labour markets worldwide. Historically associated with the project of modernity, access to secure, stable and formalised waged employment is becoming a rarer occurrence in Western contexts whereas, in the South, it has always co-existed with alternative arrangements (Breman and van der Linden 2014). Often depicted as an anti-modern sector deemed to disappear with development, informal economies have not only persisted but also gained growing relevance as a key source of livelihoods for low-income groups worldwide (Ferguson and Li 2018). As economies transition towards wageless and flexible forms of work, the restructuring of labour markets and practices has also engendered the emergence of new temporalities and forms of sociability (Abílio 2020; Gago 2017; Millar 2018). In Brazilian

cities' lower-income residential areas, this change has been observed as a generational shift, marked by the notion of waged jobs giving way among younger people to lives organised around the notion of "*viração*" (Rizek 2006). This vernacular term describes flexible, adaptable and uncertain working lives characterised by the combination of different part-time jobs (*bicos*) and constant change in response to life events and the political-economic context. It resonates with Thieme's (2018, 530) notion of young people's "hustle" in Nairobi's peripheries, defined as the "collective condition of individual insecurity disproportionately distributed amongst young people navigating uncertainty in irregular employment through prolonged states of 'waithood'." Such working practices are characterised by highly functional socio-spatial and temporal dynamics that allow workers to respond to the "everyday emergencies" (Penglase 2009) that permeate their precarious and uncertain lives, as increased flexibility is often accompanied by the dismantling of social safety nets and labour rights.

This popular economy is visible on the streets of Brazil's towns and cities where different kinds of hustlers engage in the quotidian practice of *viração*, offering products and services to passers-by. Scenes from São Paulo's famous commercial street – the 25 de Março – during the pandemic show consumers and *ambulantes* in close proximity disputing the limited space of the pavement and the road which are packed with people. The widespread use of masks is the only element that signals some abnormality in an otherwise seemingly ordinary day.<sup>viii</sup> Such quotidian scenes reveal the frenetic rhythm of workers without rights who rely on the flimsy protection of masks to maintain increasingly uncertain livelihoods. The mask symbolises a global pandemic event but also the simultaneous structural crisis of labour and Brazil's long-standing economic crisis, which reveal the impossibility of a modernised all-encompassing waged economy.

Central to Bolsonaro's rhetoric against a national lockdown is the need to keep the economy open to protect the livelihoods of unwaged workers. In March 2020, during a press conference, he told reporters: "we have a more important issue [than the virus] at the moment: the informal people that have never had a voice anywhere." Although his discourse creates a false dichotomy between saving lives and saving the economy, it resonates with the millions of marginalised workers whose experience of neglect and harassment have created suspicion against technocratic governments. Nevertheless, as the death toll rises and the economy falters while pressures for fiscal austerity have constrained the emergency income coverage, discontent against the government has increased. Common in Brazilian politics, street demonstrations have been a rarer occurrence during the pandemic as political groups are cautious of mass gatherings. In this context, street art has become a high-profile medium to project criticism of Bolsonaro's medical populism.

## Representing the Crisis: masks as street art repertoire

Across Brazilian cities, walls frequently serve as canvases for representational politics. Graffiti artists have infused their work with political meanings, challenging cultural and social norms, taking aim at politicians or cultural icons, raising provocative perspectives on current or historical events. These works often draw on highly creative styles and palettes, and are frequently situated in spaces that due to their prominence, symbolic resonance or juxtaposition, provoke audiences to reflect on an issue from a different perspective and potentially adopt a “critical awareness” (*conscientização*) (Iddings, McCafferty and da Silva 2011). Perhaps the most contentious intervention is *pixação* or *pixo*, a style that originated in São Paulo. These calligraphic symbols (*grifes*) – largely unintelligible to those outside the *pixo* crews (*famílias*) – have gained notoriety for tagging seemingly inaccessible spaces, accentuating the artist’s daring and the buzz of transgression (Lamazares 2014; Barbosa Pereira 2013). Deliberately not aligned with formal politics, *pixadores* are nonetheless political, drawing attention to abandoned buildings and speculative property developments amidst a long-standing housing crisis, and representationally signifying the presence of the “periphery,” that is the poor and popular culture, to the city (Caldeira 2012).

Graffiti and *pixação* deploy a notion of “contamination” to provoke reactions from the state, media and the public. In response, successive municipal governments have initiated “clean city” campaigns enabled by federal legislation such as Law 9605/1998 that defines graffiti and *pixação* as “defilement” (*conspuração*). The representation of graffiti and *pixação* as “dirt” has provided police with tacit licence to use extralegal means to remove or suppress the graffiti, *pixo* and tags, and of course the artists. More tolerant approaches that condone or decriminalise graffiti also emphasise the criminality of *pixação*, and sanction graffiti or murals only in designated zones (*grafitódromos*) or govern their production as part of municipal funded “art” programmes (Lamazares 2014; Morrison 2017). But, the reach and influence of street art is increasingly spatialised beyond walls and buildings, opening new possibilities to be political. The works of *pixadores* and especially graffiti artists and muralists such as Bingo, Nunca, Onesto and Os Gemeos have become internationally recognised and feature in exhibitions, festivals, music videos, vlogs and across social media. If the initial intent is to be recognised by an immediate peer group, as Lamazares observes, there is attention to a wider reception:

To be visible is to be known, to be recognized, and to exist. Recognition is both an internal code within the community of practice of street artists, and the larger social effect sought by the works as acts in public or publicly viewable space (2014, 321).

Social media especially offers less of a “second life” for the work but is increasingly the principal strategy for communicating the artist’s message (Mitman 2020). This has

become especially evident and important as artists have responded to the politics of COVID-19.

Street art during the COVID-19 crisis has paid particular attention to face masks.<sup>ix</sup> The mask is visually appealing, enigmatic, suggestive of both a statement about clinical conditions – often identifying health and care sector workers as heroes – as well as offering a wide range of other reference points from popular culture. Masks are visually adaptable, can be applied to modify existing murals, posters or billboards, and can be used as props to show support for social messaging such as the #StaytheFuckHome campaign. The Brazilian artist Eduardo Kobra’s mural entitled “Coexistence” adapts his signature kaleidoscopic style and five panel structure to represent the universality of the pandemic (see [www.eduardokobra.com/](http://www.eduardokobra.com/)). The mural depicts five children each with different ethnic backgrounds praying in accordance with the world’s major religions and each wearing a mask bearing a religious symbol. As Kobra put it on his Instagram:

We will overcome this together, but apart. ... Regardless of our geographic location, ethnicity, and religion, we are united in the same prayer: may God inspire scientists to find the solution to this pandemic – and comfort our hearts so that we have the strength and can continue together as humanity.<sup>x</sup>

Here, the face masks perform a dual role, simultaneously representing diversity and unity. It stresses the differences between the children and the cultures each represents, while creating a notion of togetherness amidst enforced isolation by expressing the shared vulnerability to the pandemic, but projecting a sense of hope for a better future.

While street art forms often play with ambiguity, leaving something to be worked out by the viewer, murals and graffiti relating to COVID-19 have mostly offered a direct message, a counterpoint to the uncertainty of the times, identifying a clear moral direction or empathetic stance. As in “Coexistence” by Kobra this can be expressed as an appeal to global humanitarianism. Therefore, although the interventions are often playful they do not suspend rules and norms, in the manner often attributed to Bakhtin for example, but “do work” in ways similar to the carnivalesque to identify common links between people, closing the distance between artist and society, and across society itself. As one might expect, President Bolsonaro has been a popular subject for street artists before and especially during the pandemic. An unattributed stencil in Rio shows Bolsonaro appearing to struggle with a mask, on which is written the phrase “COVARD-17,” a play with the word “coward” and his candidate number in the 2018 elections. These works often involve a double move; identifying that in a crisis society it is Bolsonaro who has done most to disrupt social, cultural and political sensibilities, and done least to address the pandemic, representing *him* as the outsider.

In this regard, the work of Airá Ocrespo entitled *Máscara de Bolsonaro Contra o Coronavírus* (Bolsonaro's mask against the coronavirus) is especially powerful ([Plate 4](#)). The addition of a red nose as a representational mask transforms the president's (white) face. Without the nose the demeanour is stern and the eyes focused, with it the glare is sinister, the eyes now suggest madness, the downturned mouth mimics a clown but now looks more like a smirk. Airá Ocrespo underscores, it would seem, the May 2020 editorial of the medical publication *The Lancet* that described Bolsonaro as "perhaps the biggest threat to Brazil's COVID-19 response" (The Lancet 2020). On his Instagram feed, which reproduces the "Bolsonaro's mask" image, the artist is explicit in his disdain for the president:

An abject worm, repugnant, vile, stingy, disgusting, whimsical, farcical, repressed, dumb, nasty, disloyal, liar, psychopathic, noxious, covert, treacherous, incapable, unloved, beastly, nauseating, sordid, unpalatable and cursed. The shittiest president of a banana republic!!! You can add here your worst name-calling against this filthy limited individual!!!<sup>xi</sup>

Taking an item associated with humour and the circus, and drawing a contrast with the mask of health workers, Bolsonaro's red nose mocks his authority, while leaving the viewer to consider whether his clown-like antics make him a weak fool or a brooding danger.

## Conclusion

Taking the face mask as our departure point, in this article we have examined what this seemingly mundane item reveals about how political, economic and social dimensions of crisis are manifested and reproduced in Brazilian cities. We have considered the wearing of masks as a polysemic performance, a dramaturgical exercise, that positions people in relation to others – whether with or without masks – institutions and ideas. During the pandemic these performances have become especially vital to the conduct of everyday life. No longer the preserve of scientists and medical practitioners, masks have been incorporated into the quotidian of cities. A register for people's anxieties, sense of civic responsibility, a mark of trust in government policy, a stance in relation to political ideologies, and the subject of dispute among experts, the face mask is also a signal "that something is wrong," as Sugar (2020) puts it. As we have stressed, however, for Brazilians who have grown accustomed to a putative "state of emergency" there was already an awareness that something was wrong before the pandemic; masks, therefore, have become just one more indication of a society in crisis.

Working through three vantage points, the mask reveals the limitations and contradictions of an imagined ideal of modernity and a neoliberal political-economic system. Viewed against longer genealogies of hygienist urban policies in Brazil, President Bolsonaro's

“medical populism” has been represented by his refusal to wear a face mask, especially when greeting (or leading) his supporters through the busy streets of Brazilian cities. The president’s bare face is more than a visual representation of his refusal to accept liability for entrenching the health and political crises, but works as a resistance to the idea of the mask as “an index but also a catalyst of hygienic modernity” (Lynteris 2018, 452). Rather, his unmasking reaffirms a disposition against the authority of the state that he leads, when it is instrumental to a science-informed modernity, and that “reason” should inform politics and action.

Walking the streets of Brazilian cities one is immediately aware of masks as a radical visual, aesthetic break with life as it existed “before” and yet also the realisation that this object affords a semblance of this previous normality. The manufacture and sale of masks through the popular economy connects the pandemic to the crisis of modern waged labour in urban Brazil. For workers already struggling with precarious jobs – as the guarantees and rights to work were restricted or removed – the popular economy’s capacity to adapt rapidly to new demands and uncertainties created by COVID-19 has offered a lifeline. Nevertheless, remarkable as this might be, the hustle of the popular economy to make widely available an item that symbolises scientific modernity, is predicated on a longer-term process of labour precarisation that will most probably be extended and intensified after and due to the pandemic.

Finally, responses to the pandemic have provided new material to cultural repertoires and presented opportunities to express political agitation. Masks have become powerful symbols of contentious politics. As images that adorn city walls, masks can stress the cosmopolitan idea that “we are all in this together,” as in Kobra’s art, or angrier responses, as with the irreverence of Airá Ocrespo’s work. Through creative rendering of the mask, street artists have highlighted the ordinary of the current crisis, extending familiar well-practiced visual styles and interventions, most usually mobilised to confront conventional power arrangements that manifest as social exclusion, racial discrimination and contested democracy, to include the imagery of medical and social care, and to challenge the responsibilities of politicians and the state.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> The Kaiser Family Foundation Health Track Poll has consistently found partisan support for mask-wearing, with Democrats considerably more likely to wear a mask leaving the home compared with Republicans. See <https://www.kff.org/> (accessed on 25 May 2021).

<sup>ii</sup> WHO advice on masks has been revised numerous times during the pandemic. For the latest see: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/when-and-how-to-use-masks> (accessed on 28 September 2020).

<sup>iii</sup> Frantz Fanon famously considered the mask a metaphor for understanding the racialisation of power under colonialism ([1952] 1986). To Fanon, black people metaphorically wear a mask in order to pass as white, an act that serves to present a “corporeal schema” but also underscores their subjugation, and marks the failure to attain full acceptance due to their “black skin” or what he calls the “epidermal schema.”

<sup>iv</sup> The argument owes a lot to Robert Park’s idea that people present themselves as if wearing a mask to aid in playing a role, that they then strive to live up to; the mask therefore becoming a truer version of or aspired to actual self.

<sup>v</sup> The alterity of carnival has motivated states to discipline and stage practices, proscribing routes, times, volume and dress, converting spontaneity into spectacle (Sheriff 1999).

<sup>vi</sup> From 2013 the *Seleção* shirt became the go-to choice for conservative protesters, along with the more overtly nationalist symbols (like the Brazilian flag and the national anthem), while left-wing social movements adopted red and the anarchist-inspired Black Block wore all black.

<sup>vii</sup> The styling of masks to convey solidarity with particular causes has been developed further with #BlackLivesMatter, LGBTQ+ rights, Extinction Rebellion, and pro-democracy affiliations in, for example, Hong Kong and Belarus.

<sup>viii</sup> <https://noticias.r7.com/economia/fotos/regiao-da-25-de-marco-tem-rotina-de-aglomeracao-e-ambulantes-nas-ruas-02092020#!/foto/1> (accessed 10 September 2020).

<sup>ix</sup> See <https://www.rferl.org/a/mural-masks-coronavirus-inspires-global-graffiti/30527353.html>, <https://yourstory.com/weekender/weekender-coronavirus-inspired-murals-art> (accessed 23 June 2020).

<sup>x</sup> Vamos vencer isto juntos, mas separados. Ou separados — por isso juntos. Nestes tempos de necessário isolamento social, é preciso ter fé. Independentemente da nossa localização geográfica, de nossa etnia e de nossa religião, estamos unidos em uma mesma oração: que Deus inspire os cientistas para que encontrem a solução para esta pandemia — e conforte nossos corações para que tenhamos forças e sigamos juntos como humanidade.

<sup>xi</sup> Um verme abjeto, repugnante, vil, mesquinho, asqueroso, lunático, farsante, recalçado, burro, desagradável, desleal, mentiroso, psicopata, nocivo, dissimulado, traiçoeiro, incapaz, mal amado, bestial, nauseante, sórdido, intragável e maldito. Esse é o excrementíssimo presidente numa república de bananas!!! Pode juntar aqui o seu pior xingamento contra esse imundo limitado!!!

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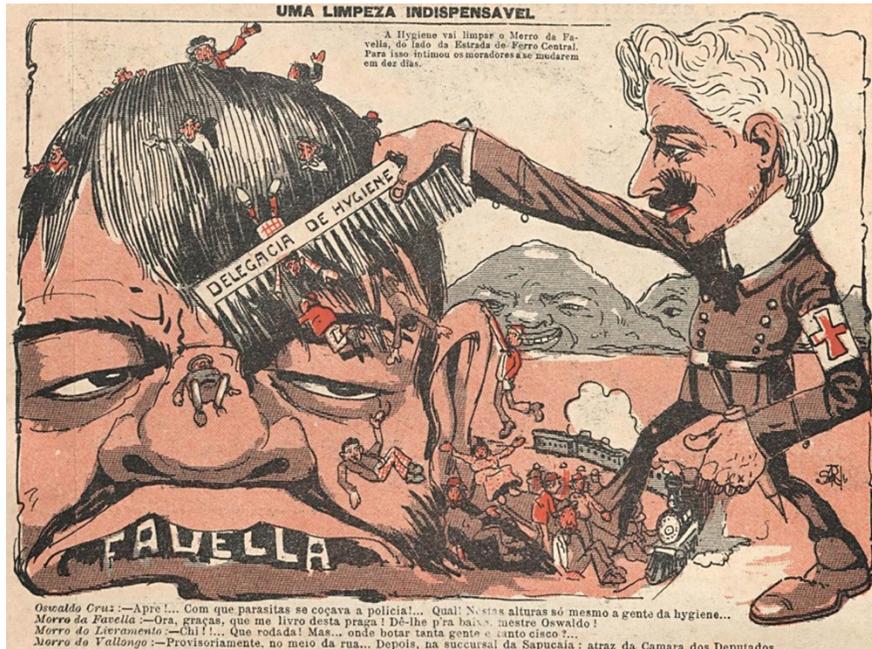
## Plate 1: The performance of protest



A protestor in Belo Horizonte during the June 2013 demonstrations wearing the Guy Fawkes mask with the Brazilian national flag rolled around the neck. The sign conveys the politically ambiguous message: “I am so angry that I made a sign” followed by a hashtag indicating that the intended audience for this performance extends beyond the immediate event.

Source: Filipe Rivelli, 2013 (with permission)

## Plate 2: An Essential Cleansing (Uma Limpeza Indispensavel)



Source:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Oswaldo Cruz passa o pente fino da %E2%80%9CDelegacia da Higiene%22 no Morro da Favela.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Oswaldo_Cruz_passa_o_pente_fino_da_%E2%80%9CDelegacia_da_Higiene%22_no_Morro_da_Favela.jpg)

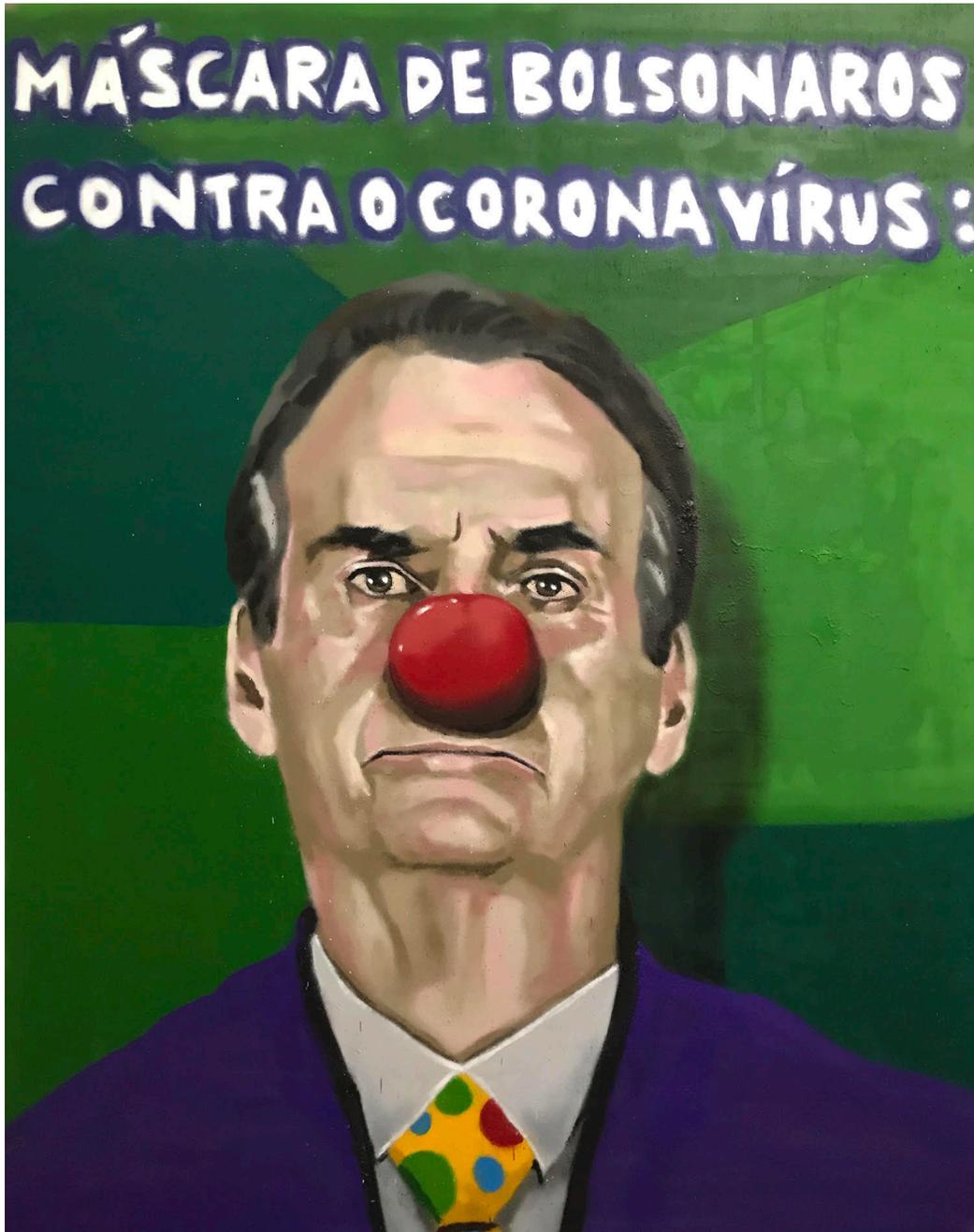
### Plate 3: Masks on Demand



Home-made masks being sold by a Belo Horizonte street vendor. The different colours and styles cater to the different tastes and needs of the clientele.

Source: Dignidade Ambulante (with permission)

Plate 4: Bolsonaro's Mask



Airá Ocrespo deploys the idea of a mask (*máscara*) to communicate his disdain for the president's handling of the pandemic, premised on Bolsonaro's erratic relationship with the medical mask.

Source: Airá Ocrespo (with permission).