

From *Homo Œconomicus* to *Homo in Debitum*: effects of neoliberalism in education

Haroldo de Resende¹

¹Universidade Federal de Uberlândia (UFU), Uberlândia/MG – Brazil

ABSTRACT – From *Homo Œconomicus* to *Homo in Debitum*: effects of neoliberalism in education. In this paper debt and indebtedness in the educational market is under discussion, which puts in operation a biopolitical control device in the subjectivization processes of the neoliberal logic established by the gradient of *Homo œconomicus*, making educational consumption an investment in the constitution of human capital. So, the production of the indebted subject transposes the subjectivity of the *Homo œconomicus* model to the form of *Homo in debitum*, which constitutes the effect of the biopolitical device. Finally, the paper points out that the control introduced in the indebted life, in the own biopolitical game, can provoke a resistance toward the invention of different truths that would produce other subjectivities not governed by debt.

Keywords: Neoliberalism. Education. Debt. Human Capital. Privatization.

RESUMO – Do *Homo Œconomicus* ao *Homo in Debitum*: efeitos do neoliberalismo na educação. Neste artigo discute-se a dívida e o endividamento no mercado educacional como um dispositivo de controle biopolítico nos processos de subjetivação da lógica neoliberal estabelecido pelo gradiente do *Homo œconomicus*, fazendo com que o consumo educacional seja o investimento na constituição do capital humano. De modo que a produção do sujeito endividado transpõe a subjetividade do modelo do *Homo œconomicus* para a figura do *Homo in debitum*, constituindo o efeito desse dispositivo biopolítico. Por fim, aponta-se que o controle que se instaura na vida endividada, no próprio jogo biopolítico, pode provocar resistência para a invenção de outros regimes de verdade que produzam outras subjetividades que não sejam governadas pela dívida.

Palavras-chave: Neoliberalismo. Educação. Dívida. Capital Humano. Privatização.

Introduction

In the course of individuals' contemporary lives – measured in populations, the object of neoliberal biopolitics – the constitution of human capital comes into play in the realm of educational investment, with one of the most prominent elements being schooling. Based on this observation, the focus is on discussing debt, more specifically, the indebtedness that operates in individuals' lives, leading them to purchase products available in the educational market or even acquire credit for the acquisition of these products.

The credit effected through loans for educational consumption is nothing other than the contraction of debt that occurs in order to materialize the constant pursuit of qualification through education, which functions as a mechanism in processes of subjectivation, both individually and socially. In the neoliberal logic, this is established by the gradient of the *Homo oeconomicus* in the rationalization of conduct, leading consumption to be understood as an investment in the constitution of human capital.

Therefore, in the pursuit of education that can shape human capital through schooling, individuals, by assuming a certain entrepreneurship and self-entrepreneurship, are urged to incur debts that function as techniques of governance. These techniques guide individuals' behavior in their pursuit of qualification and lead them to indebtedness, which has the effect of producing the indebted subject, transitioning the subjectivity from the model of the *Homo oeconomicus* to the figure of the *Homo in debitum*.

To highlight this issue of debt and indebtedness, the focus of the discussion here will be the Student Financing Fund (Fundo de Financiamento Estudantil - Fies), which is a program of the Brazilian Ministry of Education aimed at financing undergraduate courses for students enrolled in private higher education institutions, based on certain criteria that allow students to acquire loans to cover the cost of their education. The analysis of the effects of this program on students' lives as a mechanism of governing their conduct is grounded in notions developed by Michel Foucault in the genealogy of the neoliberal art of government.

Market Validation and Debt in Corporate Society

In the first lecture of the course “The Birth of Biopolitics” on January 10, 1979, Michel Foucault (2008) introduces the problem of government in contemporary times, specifically the general regime of governmental reason in liberalism. He argues that the analysis of biopolitics is only possible by understanding liberalism as a question of truth, particularly as an economic truth that informs the rationality of this governing regime. He points out that political economy introduces, in the mid-18th century, both the possibility of limiting the government and the question of truth. According to Foucault, this signifies the entry into a capital era where a government never knows how much risk it takes in

governing too much, just as it never knows exactly how to govern just enough. Thus, a particular regime of truth is established that precisely characterizes what Foucault calls the “era of politics” (Foucault, 2008, p. 25), a time in which the interplay between the true and the false is set in motion through the articulation of discourses and series of practices in the realm of reality.

Political economy introduces into modern governing art the principle of truth as a vector that indicates more or less government, since no government knows exactly how much to govern and how to govern just enough. Foucault draws attention to this, warning that it is not about the triumph of truth in politics or the arrival at a threshold of knowledge that could confer scientificity to the art of governing:

I mean that this moment [...] is marked by the articulation, in a series of practices, of a certain type of discourse that, on the one hand, constitutes it as a set linked by an intelligible bond and, on the other hand, legislates and can legislate on these practices in terms of true or false (Foucault, 2008, p. 25).

In other words, what Foucault is saying is that this historical moment, situated in the mid-18th century, is characterized by the articulation between discourses constituted by a coherent, thought-out, and rationalized intelligibility and various practices, as well as the effects of these practices. This allows for the evaluation of whether these practices are good or bad, not based on a law or morality, but regarding the demarcation of the true and the false. Foucault’s intention is to demonstrate¹ that a new regime of truth is instituted for the legitimacy of the new art of governing. What he wants

[...] it shows how the pair ‘series of practices/regime of truth’ forms a knowledge-power apparatus that effectively marks in reality what does not exist and legitimately subjects it to the demarcation of the true and the false (Foucault, 2008, p. 27).

In the current Brazilian neoliberal context, it can be said that the market, in its way of establishing validation, informs truth through exchange mechanisms that end up prescribing the price of things that shape society, especially concerning its connection to economic policy. On the other hand, it is also possible to say that a mode of social functioning based on the market emerges to the point where its logics of value, exchange, investment, profit, risk calculations, and danger are extended to practically all spheres of life, shaping an entrepreneurial society modulated by competition, typical of a market economy. This functioning is in a clear process of privatizing society and the individual, as privatization is not limited to mere payment for services acquired by the individual. This would be *stricto sensu* privatization. Foucault observes that the idea of privatization, with individuals protecting themselves from risks through their own reserves via mutual aid societies, was noticeable in French political actions in the late 1970s, when the

course *The Birth of Biopolitics* was being developed. This is the trend: the privatized social policy (Foucault, 2008, p. 199).

That is, neoliberal privatization crosses social relations and subjectivities, attributing, individually to the subjects, the guarantee against risks and dangers, so that each one must manage his own risks, calculate his actions to protect himself, without being able to claim to the *whole society*, or even the *economy*, to cover the risks that threaten and expose him to dangers. In short, the individual is held responsible for everything that can happen to him, transferring what would be the sphere of social policies to the field of individual responsibility, almost to the private sphere, since any and all actions end up passing through the filter of freedom of choice. Therefore, the subject is made responsible for the choice made, individualizing the social, at the same time that choices and responsibilities are privatized.

Foucault (2008) examines the use of market economy by neoliberalism, particularly its analytical gradient for deciphering social phenomena that, although they may have indirect relations to the economy, do not belong strictly to that field. This involves the application of an economic grid of intelligibility or an *economist analysis*, in the philosopher's expression, for understanding objects, fields, and behaviors that are not market-driven, that are not directly linked to the market or the economy. Or, in other words, it is the *economization of society*. For example, the mercantile logic is applied to decipher the field of education, of the formation of children, of the family, and of schooling, which are not phenomena attached to economic relations per se.

This application of the economic gradient to phenomena that are not strictly linked to mercantile processes and structures ends up characterizing the inversion of the relations of the social dimension with the economic one and corresponds to the *politics of society*, which, in turn, takes charge of the generalization of the corporate form in the social body, in such a way that this social body is unfolded according to the corporate logic. The existence of the individual, in this perspective, is not inscribed in a large company that would be, after all, the State itself, but in a multiple entrepreneurial complex that entangles his choices and actions. Moreover, the individual's very existence must become a multiple and permanent enterprise, which, in a certain way, privatizes him to the extent that all gestures, all actions, all efforts, end up slipping into the individual dimension. Thus, in order to make his existence a field of enterprise and constant innovation, it detaches him from the entire political-economic context to enable him to compete with others, who must also behave as enterprises in the common market of neoliberalized human life.

What is configured, therefore, is the establishment of a way of life that is the unfolding of the economic model in the existence of individuals. Veiga-Neto (2011) argues, for that matter, that in the courses developed by Foucault, from the second half of the 1970s, it is quite clear that, contrary to understanding liberalism and neoliberalism respectively as the rationale and justification of capitalism and advanced capitalism,

[...] it is more productive to understand them as a way of life, as ethos, as a way of being and being in the world. In educational terms, this is of the utmost importance, to the extent that, instead of the school being seen as a place where ideologies are taught and learned, it, much more than that, comes to be understood as an institution in charge of manufacturing new subjectivities (Veiga-Neto, 2011, p. 38).

In this manufacture of new subjectivities, biopolitical mechanisms are generalized whose operation is around supply, demand, cost, investment, risk, danger, profit; in short, the losses and gains in the life of the individual and, of the individual in the life of society, so that the economic model becomes paradigmatic of social relations, of formation, of individual and collective subjectivities, consubstantiating “[...] a model of existence, a form of relation of the individual to himself, to time, to his circle, to the future, to the group, to the family” (Foucault, 2008, p. 332).

Indeed, the generalization of the business model has implications for the existence of individuals, in such a way that concrete anchoring points are formed around their lives. These points constitute the *politics of life*. Thus, the market ends up causing effects of existence in this entrepreneurial society way of life, prescribing behaviors, attitudes, actions and conducts. What comes into play, in this model of entrepreneurial society engendered according to market economy rules, is the individual subject, to the extent that his behavior is taken from an economic point of view, that is, his behavior is analyzed by the intelligibility grid of the economy, since the generalization of the economic form of the market makes this gradient work as a deciphering principle of social relations and individual behavior.

Thus, the subject is taken for the analysis of his insertion in (corporate) society without considering sociological, psychological or anthropological contents, but only that which can make him governmentalizable, which means that any action can only be exercised on him, that power falls on him only to the extent that this individual is *Homo oeconomicus*. “That is, the surface of contact between the individual and the power that is exercised over him, hence the principle of regulation of power over the individual, is going to be this kind of grid of *Homo oeconomicus*” (Foucault, 2008, p. 345-346).

It can be said, thus, that in this grid of intelligibility of *Homo oeconomicus*, a regime of truth is established that composes, with certain practices, a device of knowledge-power in the educational environment, causing a series of effects: of discourse, power, existence, finally. Although Foucault notes that what the neoliberals call educational investments - in terms of what constitutes human capital in the formation of machine-competence - is not restricted to schooling or professional learning, it is possible to state that education or, in less comprehensive terms, school practices, in the configuration of a corporate society, are directly implied and submitted to the grids of neoliberal intelligibility.

In other words, even if school and schooling do not strictly belong to the field of economics, they end up being, on the one hand, deciphered by the scheme of the economic gradient and, on the other hand, being a social phenomenon that interacts in the neoliberal environment. The school apparatus is itself a mechanism of social bioregulation. So, from this perspective of the neoliberal intelligibility grid, it is possible to state that school education, in its functioning in this social model, is configured as a business education that embodies practices and produces individuals that correlate with the business way of life.

In the regime of truth established by the neoliberal coordinates for the composition of human capital in the entrepreneurial society, the individual, imbued with a sense of entrepreneurship, sees in education, in general, and in schooling, in particular, a way to properly compose his human capital. It is thus, by the acquisition of skills, by dominating the *learning-to-learn*, by the improvement of techniques, by the learning of new knowledge, by the certification, by the possession of one diploma after another, that, in the knowledge society embraced by the entrepreneurial society, the *Homo æconomicus*, as a subject in constant training and as a perpetual student, becomes the correlate of the *Homo discentis*, “[...] a *Homo* permanent learner, defined by his condition of being a lifelong learner, or rather, a *Homo* who, to be such, must learn permanently” (Nogueira-Ramírez, 2011, p. 17).

That is, at the crossroads between business logic and lifelong learning, between the individual enterprise of the economic man model and the mechanisms that fix it in the lineaments of the *knowledge society*², the market is interposed, not only as a place of truth, but also as a space of practices that are linked to the truths established by its discursive regime. Now, if the market with its truth is a place of supply, demand, demand, buying, selling, credit, debit, investment; it is also a place of debt and indebtedness. Therefore, in the knowledge society, education becomes a necessary commodity in the investment of human capital, and can be acquired on credit, like any other product available in the market for the free consumption of those who have purchasing power or credit.

It is at this point that debt emerges not only as a market mechanism, but also as a government technology³ in the bioregulation of education, since, in the eagerness for entrepreneurship, in order to raise inputs for the investment of human capital formation, the individual is led to contract debts for the acquisition of qualification through more education, more schooling, more training. The notion of government, then, is expanded beyond the idea of political management of the State, making up a much broader sense that concerns the conduction of behaviors, the ways in which the management of individuals’ behavior is operated, so that it is the set of discursive and non-discursive tactics used to ensure domination. “To govern is to conduct the behaviors of a population, of a multiplicity that needs to be watched, like a shepherd with his flock, to maximize potential and guide freedom” (Comitê Invisível, 2016, p. 80). For Foucault (1995, p. 244), “To govern is to structure the eventual field of action of others”.

Negri and Hardt (2016) observe that the trumpeting of neoliberalism has caused changes not only in the economy and politics, but has also effected social and anthropological modifications, by fabricating new subjective figures, one of them being the figure of the indebted, that individual whose life is marked and demarcated by constant and growing indebtedness. That ends up establishing an indebted way of life, in which the subject lives in debt and survives under the yoke of debt and the responsibility of having to pay it off someday.

Nowadays, having debts is becoming the general condition of social life. It is almost impossible to live without taking on debt: educational credit for college, mortgage for the house, financing for the car, insurance for health, etc. The social safety net has moved from a welfare system to one of debt, as loans have become the primary means of meeting social needs (Negri; Hardt, 2016, p. 22).

The constitution of the subjectivity of the neoliberal individual, of *Homo discentis*, as a subject that makes up his educational capital is based on debt, which, in this respect, makes him governmentalizable. This is what Lazzarato (2015) calls *the government of the indebted man*, in such a way that debt constitutes a technique of government in the production of the neoliberal subject.

Debt is the most suitable technique for the production of the neoliberal homo [sic] oeconomicus. The student not only considers himself a human capital, which he must value for his own investments (the credits he takes out to study), but he feels obliged, moreover, to act, think, and behave as if he were an individual enterprise (Lazzarato, 2017, p. 67).

Student Entrepreneur, Student in Debt

With the notion of development tied to human capital and, at the same time, having security and freedom on the horizon of reflection, Foucault puts under analysis the generalization of the enterprise form in the social body, so that this social body unfolds not through the life of each individual, but through the enterprise, anchoring itself in a regime of truth that supports the idea that the individual must be the manager of himself, as human capital. That is, the individual will not inscribe his or her life within the scope of a large company that, in the limit, would be the State, as pointed out above, but must inscribe it in a great diversity of companies that fit together and intertwine. The very life of the individual, in everything that involves his relations with family, schooling, employment, remuneration, retirement, should make him a kind of permanent and multiple company, capable of managing himself as such.

Considering this entrepreneurialism that materializes the dynamics of human capital composition in neoliberal rationality and practices, policies, particularly educational ones, are forwarded to this direction. "It is in this direction, in fact, that we clearly see that eco-

conomic policies, but also social policies, but also cultural policies, educational policies of all developed countries are oriented” (Foucault, 2008, p. 319).

Brazilian educational policy relies on the Student Financing Fund (Fies), which has *social inclusion* and *democratization of higher education* as its stated goals (Brasil, 2019). This is a program of the Ministry of Education intended to finance undergraduate courses for students enrolled in higher education at private institutions that have had a positive evaluation in processes conducted by the Ministry of Education itself.

This program finances up to 100% of the educational fees charged by the educational institutions that adhere to the fund, depending on calculations of the gross monthly family income and the commitment to monthly tuition costs. Fies is a fund that is primarily intended for students who have not completed higher education and have not benefited from student financing. It is forbidden to grant new financing to a student in default with Fies or with the Educational Credit Program (Brasil, 2019).

According to SISFIES⁴ data, in 2010, the program began to operate in a format in which the financing interest rate was set at 3.4% per year, the grace period increased to 18 months, and the amortization period to 3 times the regular course duration period, plus 12 months (Brasil, 2023). The National Fund for Education Development (Fundo Nacional de Desenvolvimento da Educação - FNDE), from that year on, became the program’s Operating Agent for formal contracts. In addition, the percentage of funding increased to up to 100%, and applications began to be made in a continuous flow, allowing students to apply for funding at any time of the year. From the second half of 2015, the funding granted with Fies resources started to have an interest rate of 6.5% per year, in view of the sustainability of the program (Brasil, 2019). The intention, according to the website, was to realign the interest rate, the existing conditions in the economic scenario, and the need for fiscal adjustment.

FNDE (2017), the operating agent of the credit program, in its presentation page, brings the argument that Fies “[...] is a modern student financing model, aimed at those who need it most, with zero real interest rates and installments that fit in the student’s pocket. He recommends that, “[...] to achieve the dreamed professional education, the student-debtor should keep his Fies up to date and pay attention to the amounts and due dates of the installments”. Still, it hints that *financial planning* is of special importance for “[...] students in the professional formation phase” with the recommendation of reading the *Financial Education Booklet* (BCB, 2013) that, according to the prescriptions of the website, will provide “[...] knowledge and information on basic behaviors to improve financial management”.

In turn, the website of the Brazilian Association of Maintainers of Higher Education (Associação Brasileira de Mantenedoras do Ensino Superior - ABMES) presents data pointing out that the default rate with Fies has been increasing in recent years: 42% in 2015, 47% in 2016, 52%

in 2017 and 58% in 2018 (Atraso..., 2019). These data show not only some indices of debt and indebtedness in the search for educational training, but also indicate at what cost the constitution of *Homo oeconomicus* or, more specifically, following the denomination of Nogueira-Ramirez (2011), of *Homo discentis*, is effective, so that this life, lived on credit, produces a very specific type of subjectivity, as pointed out earlier.

The student, by contracting the loan out of a will guided by the imperious need to, like a company, undertake his qualification to deal with the variables of the environment in which he finds himself, also projects upon himself mechanisms of control and coercion that, unlike discipline, are not operationalized in a closed space like that of the school institution itself, for example, nor do they come from outside devices. The control of the subject by debt is exercised over himself in a space and time that are dilated within the very life of the student debtor.

The time for settling the debt lasts for years, even decades, a time in which the debtor, this walking company, is supposed to organize himself autonomously for the efficient administration of his life, having on the horizon the settling of the debit balance. In a certain sense, the diary of his life takes the form of a cash book, since he will behave as the accountant of his own life, which is embodied in the initial message of the *Financial Education Booklet* (BCB, 2013), which states that “Every citizen can develop skills to improve their quality of life [...], from behavioral attitudes and basic knowledge about personal finance management applied in their daily lives”.

In this sense, Lazzarato says that “Debt imposes a learning of behavior, accounting rules and organizational principles usually put into operation within a company for people who have not yet entered the labor market” (Lazzarato, 2017, p. 67). Learning on debt and through debt configures an important aspect of the formation of the neoliberal man, in what constitutes him as a subject of enterprise in his practices in the labor market, in productivity, in training, in employability, giving him the introjection of habits and attitudes that conform him adequately to the operating system of business practices. In this respect, Lazzarato asks:

What better preparation for the logic of capital and its rules of profitability, productivity and guilt than to enter the labor market in debt? By imprinting on the body and spirits the logic of creditors, isn't debt education the ideal initiation into the rites of capital? (Lazzarato, 2017, p. 63).

For Lazzarato, time and its duration are situated at the heart of debt, especially future time, since not only the time of life and work is accounted for, but, above all, the time that is to come. The debt, by connecting the present with the future, makes this future a governing practice, mortgaging behavior, salaries, when they exist, and the entire projection of income and consumption, in a kind of kidnapping of the future.

Although the contraction of debt holds the promise of the future, of freedom in the future, the indebted student is imprisoned in the present day-to-day life of the debt that lasts for a good part of his life. In this perspective of debt in time and the time of debt, the indebted time, Bauman (2010, p. 29), when arguing about life on credit, states that

[...] all 'later' sooner or later will turn into 'now' – the loans will have to be paid back; and the repayment of the loans, taken out to put off the waiting of desire and meet the old desires promptly, will make it even more difficult to satisfy the new desires. The repayment of these loans separates 'waitin' from 'wanting', and promptly meeting your present desires makes it even more difficult to meet your future desires.

Conclusion

In the pursuit of an education that can substantiate human capital through schooling, students, by taking on a certain entrepreneurship and entrepreneurialism of their lives, are urged to contract debts that function as techniques of government. These technologies lead the students to conduct themselves in order to qualify, being led to a state of permanent indebtedness that has the effect of producing the indebted subject, transposing the subjectivity of the *Homo oeconomicus* model to the figure of *Homo in debitum*, that individual whose life is governed by debt. By turning his existence into a profitable enterprise through educational training as a way to compose his human capital, the subject is governed and conducted by debt, having his freedom guided by the logic of entrepreneurialism. His way of thinking, his way of acting, his desires, his fears, all his behavior is regulated and modeled by the entrepreneurial anxiety of himself, making debt work as this governing technology. It is the entrepreneurialism invading the processes of life through the paths of the educational field.

Foucault's study of the liberal arts of government, as Lemke argues, also leads to forms of resistance and practices of freedom that may well make up biopolitical strategies.

Power that extends into life processes and seeks to regulate them provokes resistance, which makes claims and demands for recognition around the body and life. The expansion and intensification of control over life makes it concomitantly the target of social struggles (Lemke, 2018, p. 75).

That is, disciplining and regulation, individual and mass, two poles interconnected by numerous bundles of relations that establish the standardization of existence, in this specific case, by debt. However, at the same time in which the individual and the population are the target of technologies of government that subject them to discipline and regulation, configuring, in the social body, a certain type of subjectivation, it is also possible the foundation of other modes of existence, of new forms of political struggles and resistance that are linked to the

strengthening and claims of rights and the maintenance of rights. On the horizon of struggle and resistance is the invention of other possible subjectivities. Perhaps the invention of a subject that refuses to live life on credit or on installments, a subject that does not want to be ruled by debt - and wants to live life in the present! Or, even more, what is on the horizon of the struggle, the rebellion, the insurgencies as practices of freedom, is perhaps the invention of another regime of truth that can establish other modes of government, other forms of life, other subjectivities, since

The problem is not to change people's 'consciousness', or what they have in their minds, but the political, economic, institutional regime of truth production.

It is not a matter of liberating truth from every system of power [...] but of disentangling the power of truth from the forms of hegemony (social, economic, cultural) within which it functions at the moment.

In short, the political question is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness, or ideology; it is truth itself (Foucault, 1992, p. 14).

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Notes

- 1 Foucault, in this sense, deals with the truth regime that is established as a principle of government self-limitation. In a way, the operation he carries out is similar to when he studies madness, delinquency, and sexuality, as he is not concerned with showing how these objects were previously hidden before being discovered or how these objects are nothing more than illusions or ideological productions to be unveiled by reason. What Foucault does is show how interferences in a series of practices, when aligned within a regime of truth, have caused what did not exist (madness, delinquency, sexuality) to come into existence in reality.
- 2 The knowledge society, also called the learning society, society of education, or even the educational society, is characterized as the space and time in which learning must be constant and lifelong, in a kind of educational inflation throughout the social body and at all stages of the life of individuals, becoming an endless training, making the inhabitant of this society a permanent learner, as their education is meant to be lifelong and uninterrupted. For a more detailed discussion in this regard, see Resende (2018).
- 3 The notion of government is extended beyond the idea of political management of the state, making up a much broader sense that concerns the conduction of conducts, ways through which the management of the behavior of individuals is operated, so that it is the set of discursive and non-discursive tactics used to ensure domination. "To govern is to conduct the behaviors of a population, of a multiplicity that needs to be watched over, like a shepherd with his flock, to maximize potential and guide freedom" (Comitê Invisível, 2016, p. 80). For Foucault (1995, p. 244), "To govern is to structure the eventual field of action of others".
- 4 SISFIIES is the Fies computerized system, a platform available on the Internet that has the function of systematizing all the processes of this Fund. It is

through it that the adherence of sponsors, the enrollment of students, as well as the execution, management and control of Fies assets and liabilities are carried out (Brasil, 2023).

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Haroldo de Resende holds a Bachelor's degree in Pedagogy and Law and a Master's degree in Brazilian Education from the Federal University of Uberlândia (UFU). He obtained his Ph.D. in Education: History, Politics, and Society and his Postdoctoral degree in Philosophy from the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo - PUC-SP). He is a full professor at UFU's Faculty of Education.
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9379-111X>
Email: haroldoderesende@ufu.br

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