

COVID-19 in Brazil

Jean Segata¹

Marcia Grisotti²

Rozeli Porto³

¹Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, RS, Brasil

²Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, SC, Brasil

³Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, Natal, RN, Brasil

Two years into the pandemic, the expressive numbers leave no room for doubt: COVID-19 has been the most tragic event in recent history. As of March 11, 2022, the Coronavirus Resource Center at John Hopkins University showed over 471 million confirmed cases worldwide and 6.07 million deaths. On the same day, the #PainelConass COVID-19 showed that Brazil had reached 657,000 deaths¹. But it is not just the numbers and their important biomedical and epidemiological repercussions that need highlighting. Pandemics also provoke and deepen structures of inequality and social injustice, with a large number of devastating humanitarian, economic, environmental, political and cultural effects in the short, medium and long term (Grossi & Toniol 2020; Torales et al. 2020; Gamlin et al. 2021; Grisotti, 2020; Segata et al. 2021; Segata et al. 2022).

The Brazilian case is particularly disturbing. The COVID-19 pandemic has become a critical event of multiple proportions, exacerbated by the disastrous but no less premeditated combination of a president characterized as genocidal and a government commanded by economic capital. All over the country, in states and municipalities, pandemic management committees have multiplied, formed largely by political agents, their advisors, and representatives of the corporate interests of industry and commerce. Community leaders and union representatives of the working class were not invited to sit at these management tables, even when the agenda was the in-person reopening of industry, of commerce, or a return to in-person learning. The fate of the population during the pandemic has not been negotiated as if it were in a situation of vulnerability and at risk of contamination and illness (Mastrangelo, Segata & Rico, 2020). The same can be said of indigenous peoples, whose chronic neglect by Brazilian governments was once again intensely present, aggravating the historical conditions of structural violence to which they are subjected (Scopel et al., 2021). Thus, a myriad of problems provide evidence that the pandemic is a social event that goes well beyond biology and health issues, gaining broad ground in labour relations, while generating deeper structural inequality and social exclusion in Brazil.

¹ Coronavirus Resource Center. Available at <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu>. The Conselho Nacional de Secretários de Saúde (CONASS) [National Council of Health Secretaries], maintains daily updates on COVID-19 numbers in Brazil on its Twitter account. On August 15, the precise number of deaths was 569,068 and the cumulative number of cases was 20,364,099. Available at: <https://twitter.com/ConassOficial/status/1427012221968678912>. Both accessed August 16, 2021.

Mobilisations on the street and on social networks in defence of the Unified Health System (SUS), the activism of academics who disseminate science, the formation of a consortium of large media outlets to produce secure information, and institutional alliances of public and private entities in Brazil and abroad for the transfer of knowledge and technology to facilitate the production of medicines, vaccines and the development of treatments, have been in positive discord with this scenario of destruction. However, the reactions of political leaders and far-right reactionary groups hinder the consolidation of protection and care measures, while reducing the pandemic to a technocratic war between the virus and the market – to the dilemma of ‘life or the economy’ – have established an unprecedented attack on human rights in Brazil (Ventura, Aith & Reis, 2021).

This issue of *Vibrant - Virtual Brazilian Anthropology* presents the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil from different perspectives, themes and fields of anthropological research. The purpose of the works organized here is to highlight the unique forms and effects of the pandemic, producing knowledge that assists in the construction of situated policies for its mitigation.

An accurate understanding of the dynamics of social transformations resulting from the pandemic and the evaluation of actions to contain them are evidence of ethical and human rights implications that merit critical analysis; moreover, the uniqueness of the populations involved, their levels of vulnerability and exposure based on their diversity and their inequality need to be considered. Discourses, materialities and practices not only particularize individual and collective experiences and strategies, but also the risks, vulnerabilities, intensities and consequences of the pandemic (Segata, 2020). Therefore, analyses and responses to the pandemic impel interdisciplinary approaches and intersectoral policies that give pre-eminence to culturally situated knowledge and experiences, including tradition, religiosity, ethnicity, gender, age, labour relations and socioeconomic distinctions, which need to be tensioned at different scales, together with their local and global implications. This becomes evident in the first article of this issue, *Techno-politicizing pandemic scales*, by Moisés Kopper.

Based on the perspective of infrastructure anthropology and socio-technical studies, Kopper explores the multidimensional aspects of the pandemic and draws attention to the scalar dimensions involved in the dissemination and combat of COVID-19. According to the author, the pandemic has been analysed as an urban phenomenon, but dissemination of the virus has affected regions in the vast interior of Brazil, many of which lack the equipment and infrastructure to deal with it. Through analysis of official posts by the municipal government of Picada Café, Rio Grande do Sul, on its Facebook profile, and reactions to them by the residents, along with the application of an online survey among owners and employees of small businesses in two towns in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul, the author shows how the process of interiorisation of COVID-19 culminated in a wide range of political, economic and social negotiations. To achieve this, he investigated the symbiotic relationship between governments and citizens in the digital environment through analysis of, on the one hand, strategies developed by the municipality to combat the virus, such as regulations, indicators, the presentation of numbers, and policies of control and counting cases and victims of COVID-19, and on the other, the ways in which the controversies were translated into technical and moral terms, how local moralities were negotiated, and how the administration and attribution of responsibilities were configured.

In a work that similarly addresses the different scales of the pandemic and its local socio-political implications, the second article of this issue brings to the debate the lived experiences of the residents of the town of São Caetano de Odivelas, in the interior of Pará, in different moments of the pandemic. The town possesses characteristics that are quite different from other regions of the country, particularly regarding the close relationships between family members and neighbours. The article by José Guilherme dos Santos Fernandes, *COVID-19 pandemic in a local town in the Amazon*, shows how COVID-19 is a social phenomenon with important lacunae between the national, universalising norms and local models, values and practices. Through the application of a survey, the author analyses the characteristics of sociability in local towns that contribute to the clinical and epidemiological cases of the COVID-19 pandemic, the political obstacles in controlling the

disease and measures to minimise the effects of the pandemic. The article emphasises the role of anthropology in understanding the controversies caused when the suspension of social and economic activities causes ambivalent consequences: health protection and economic downturn, and the moralities created concerning 'outsiders' (tourists and non-resident workers), especially when they were included in the official statistics of infected or hospitalised cases. The article also problematises the impact of research in relation to the mistaken use of the survey by local authorities to justify their decree to reopen commercial activities.

Continuing within the sphere of political clashes and mistaken and malicious uses of information, the work of Gabriela Dias Blanco, Eleandra Raquel da Silva Koch and Camila Dellagnese Prates investigate the controversies that emerged during the production of the first vaccine against COVID-19 in Brazil, CoronaVac, and its relation to claims of pre-emptive treatment, evoked by different actors, including the federal government. Through a virtual ethnography of digital documents from government agencies and medical entities, journalistic articles and publications in groups on the social network Facebook, the authors mobilise Bruno Latour's (2005) actor-network theory to understand how facts and fictions are constructed, and Annemarie Mol's (2002) concept of *enact* to understand how relational practices create realities, and the principle of symmetry to map tensions that relationships generate in the construction of realities. Thus, the article maps the emergence of the CoronaVac vaccine and the groups against it, while presenting a chronology of the political and scientific controversies involved in prescribing chloroquine (and, later, other drugs) as preventive treatments for COVID-19. Next, the authors describe the process of approving the emergency use of the vaccine by ANVISA and end by reflecting on the effects of the controversies involved on the means of controlling the pandemic in Brazil.

In another analytical work, Caetano Sordi, Jean Segata and Bernardo Lewgoy show how the pandemic took shape and intensified under the harmful combination of political and corporate agents, the dismantling of social policies, and historical relations of power and inequalities that actuate together with the virus in the constitution of environments of risk and vulnerability. In their article *COVID-19 and disaster capitalism: 'Passando a boiada' in the Brazilian meat processing chain*, the authors present the social impacts of the pandemic among workers in the meatpacking sector and the labour and environmental issues related to this activity.

Accidents and occupational illness have already provided strong evidence of unsanitary conditions in the meatpacking industry, but the high rates of COVID-19 among its workers showed how much the meat chain enables the circulation of, exposure to, and contamination by the virus. Reports from people who worked even while they were sick with COVID-19 for fear of not providing their families, with imminent cuts in wages due to work absences, show the harmful effects of labour and environmental deregulation that form the performance infrastructure of the agribusiness. This scenario is even more concerning when correlated with the fact that agri-food production in Brazil, particularly meat, increased its yield and exports by approximately 10% in 2020, despite the pandemic: the same year, Brazil once again made international news regarding unsanitary food processing. These elements indicate the development of the sector at the expense of the precarisation of labour relations, including overexposure to the risk of contamination in a sector that notably employs young black people, migrants from Venezuela, Haiti and Senegal, and indigenous peoples from the western territories of the States of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina and Paraná, under extremely precarious working conditions (Granada et al. 2021; Segata, Beck & Muccillo 2021). Finally, the notion of multi-species health defended by the authors of this article is critical of well-known policies based on One Health, which inevitably echo models extrinsic to local sensitivities, a common practice in the sphere of global health, but also enables us to surmount an historical analytical dichotomy, by comprehending the movement of environmental, animal and human predation on the same plane. According to the authors, social, environmental and health crises are not isolated events; social inequalities, precarious, speciesist, racialised work and the intensive production of unhealthy ecologies that feed emerging pathogens together form a scenario of chronic destruction that exploits and sickens humans, animals and environments. This concerns what Bruno Latour (2017) called *a profound mutation*

in our relation to the world – and the authors perceive the COVID-19 pandemic as an evident manifestation of this ongoing catastrophe. Finally, the work of Sordi, Segata and Lewgoy discusses how the impacts of the pandemic on different social groups need to be investigated considering their syndemic characteristics and the forms of structural violence that intensify their effects (Singer & Rilko-Bauer, 2021).

This line of thinking also links up with the sixth article of this issue, by Soraya Fleischer and Júlia Vilela Garcia. From the perspective of studies on care, the article *'Early stimulation' in the scenario of Congenital Zika Virus Syndrome* analyses the adverse and synergistic interaction between diseases and debilitating conditions that are, according to Singer and Rilko-Bauer (2021), promoted or facilitated by social and environmental conditions and forms of frequently hidden structures of inequality, such as poverty, racism and discrimination, which negatively impact the lives and well-being of the affected populations.

Fleisher and Garcia describe three moments that pervaded the Zika virus and COVID-19 epidemics in Brazil: the onset of the epidemic and rehabilitation therapies for children in 2016, the decreasing severity of Zika virus in 2019, and the social isolation imposed due to the novel coronavirus in 2020. Based on these stages, the authors demonstrate the changes, articulations and crises imposed by such epidemic and pandemic scenarios. Therapies situated the Zika mothers in the epidemic and legitimised motherhood in the context of disability, such that these women learned to turn to specific health professionals. For them, this was something that was lost during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the space of in-person sociability was replaced, in practice, by the virtual one. Thus, they observe the emergence of numerous questions on the part of mothers and families regarding state power, particularly in relation to the precariousness of public policies and children's care, which brought irreversible consequences for those affected by this panorama of accumulated diseases.

Inspired by the proposition of Didier Fassin (2018) on inequality in the value of lives, the subsequent article by Fernanda Cruz Rifiotis uses other policies on life as an analytical key to understand the impacts of the pandemic among the older adult population. Entitled *Pour d'autres politiques de la vie*, the multiple, unequal event that characterises the COVID-19 pandemic, as experienced by older adult men and women during the pandemic, is subject to analysis that surpasses the common-sense approaches to public health policies through the principle of biollegitimacy (the legitimacy of biological life). In this ethnographic research, mediated by the report of three cases, the author retrieves the biographical dimension of these lives, showing how strategies of agency, networks of interdependence and of technologies constituted new experiences and meanings for understanding aging, in the context of social isolation and the conversion of older adult men and women into risk groups.

It is important to emphasise that older adults are subject to public discourses in which care is transformed into control, associating aging with a lack of autonomy, incapacity and dependence and, thus, contradicting contemporary trends that favour efforts of active, autonomous and independent self-production (Schuch, VÍctora & Siqueira, 2021). Research developed by the *Rede COVID-19 Humanidades MCTI* [COVID-19 Humanities MCTI Network], like that which resulted in Rifiotis' article, has shown that aging and the management of hazards associated with COVID-19 infection are better understood when viewed from the relationships between the person, their family and neighbourhood ties, and care networks, more than the exclusively normative character associated with chronological age (Schuch, VÍctora & Siqueira, 2020). In these works, a significant modification is also perceived in the family dynamics of living arrangements in the home, carried out to provide active forms of protection against contamination by the virus and the mitigation of risks caused by the pandemic. Homes have become important care infrastructures in the context of health vulnerability caused by the pandemic, revealing the importance of the domestic and family space in the social and political scenario of the pandemic (Schuch, VÍctora & Siqueira, 2020; Rede Vírus MCTI 2021). This is a topic that is also highlighted in the eighth article of this issue by Daniela Petti, *Precariousness and inequalities amidst daily uncertainty*.

Petti addresses the manner in which the production of precariousness and the intersection of inequalities are inscribed in the daily life of Arlinda, a research interlocutor, particularly in relation to her articulations with the state (social benefits), family networks and the neighbourhood. A reflection that, in the present pandemic context, connects to her narratives of hope as a constitutive part of the policy of the valuation and devaluation of life. Among other issues, the author notes that '*O cuidado de si*' [Caring for yourself] does not depend on how the individuals lead their lives, since people are compelled to face mechanisms of unequal valuation of life once socioeconomic and political dispositions are exposed. She highlights that the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world were quite heterogeneous, due to the fact that social markers of difference, like gender and social class, engender notably precarious bodies. According to Petti, the way in which Arlinda elaborates life in her narratives and practices demonstrates that hope is understood as a way of managing uncertainty in a daily life marked by the continuous production of precariousness.

The next article, *Hunger doesn't wait* by Milena Mateuzi Carmo, also highlights the solidarity networks articulated during the COVID-19 pandemic in peripheral contexts. Carmo reflects on how the pandemic superimposed violence in the peripheries and intensified the economic crisis that was unleashed a few years ago in Brazil. The author thus demonstrates how women are notably affected by state violence, unlike men, especially young, black men, who are mostly direct targets of cases of police violence, homicides and arrests. She observes that when women suffer these losses, they end up taking on the task of care that expands in these locations. In addition, she also explicitly elucidates a context marked not only by the lack of responsibility on the part of the state regarding access to social rights, but also by resistances and struggles that articulate race, gender, class and territory, which have grown in the last decade. To conclude, the author addresses the fundamental role of the women who produce these networks based on their daily experiences marked by care that is not limited to the domestic context, but rather by a gendered practice that produces relationships and struggles, with precariousness and interdependence being recognised and valued in this space.

Closing this issue of *Vibrant*, the article by Marco Aurélio Máximo Prado, Paula Sandrine Machado, Amana Mattos and Luis Felipe Rios, *Managing risk and sexuality in the COVID-19 context*, highlights important discussion points concerning sexual practices and the management of risk in the current scenario of COVID-19, in order to understand the impact of the pandemic on the sexual experiences of the population. To this end, the authors resume the category 'risk management' in studies on management and health in the context of HIV/AIDS investigations and mounting practices, blending different information in the management of offline sexual encounters in the pandemic context. Based on data originating from semi-structured interviews that form part of the ongoing research entitled *SEXVID*, they observe that, in Brazil, scientific information on 'risks' and forms of 'protection' are offered to people so that they can 'calculate' the degree of transmissibility of the virus, causing these persons to decide not only for themselves, but also for others. As analysed in the article, beginning with the production of denialist governmental acts, negative interferences are observed in care for the population, not only in the fight against COVID-19, but in general, disseminated throughout different policies on health.

Along broader lines, the set of cases analysed in this issue of *Vibrant* show us how investment in analysis and responses to the pandemic opens up new fronts not only in the human sciences, but for the population in general, for productive sectors and for the state, since this reflection on health crises is not focused specifically on the technical-biological mechanisms that constitute these events, rather on the relationships and transformations they cause in societies (Keck, 2010). In short, what these works do is to highlight 'forms of knowledge, scientific practices and intervention policies, focusing in particular on the effects of these articulations for certain historically situated subjects' (Fonseca, Rohden & Machado, 2012: 7).

In addition, the dynamics of the pandemic analysed in this issue are in line with what Charters and Heitman (2021) claim regarding the manner in which linear narratives of beginning, climax and end are exceeded. Pandemics and epidemics are experienced in cycles of intensity and temporality in which the end – or ends – do not imply the cessation of the circulation of the pathogen and the reduction of contamination and death through immunisation or treatment. Unlike the idealistic hope of ‘biological eradication’, the end of a catastrophe of this nature depends much more on continuous political, ethical, and social negotiations regarding ‘acceptable levels’ that are determined to be a ‘manageable part of normal life’ (Charters & Heitman, 2021). Thus, in this extremely harmful scenario of the (mis)government of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, the question that arises concerns the disparities and social injustices involved in this nebulous, complex and uncertain zone that is often described as ‘post-pandemic’. After all, what is an acceptable level of contamination, illness, and death to the point where it becomes a manageable part of normal life? COVID-19 in Brazil is still an open question.

Received: October 13, 2021

Approved: November 21, 2021

Translated by Philip Sidney Pacheco Badiz

References

- CHARTERS, Erica; HEITMAN, Kristin. 2021. “How epidemics end”. *Centaurus*, 63: 210-224.
- FASSIN, Didier. 2018. *La Vie : Mode d'emploi critique*. France: Éditions du Seuil.
- FONSECA, Claudia; ROHDEN, Fabiola & MACHADO, Paula Sandrine (orgs.). 2012. *Ciências na vida: antropologia da ciência em perspectiva*. São Paulo: Terceiro Nome.
- GAMLIN, Jennie et al. 2021. “Centring a Critical Medical Anthropology of COVID-19 in Global Health discourse”. *BMJ Global Health*, 2021(6): e006132.
- GRANADA, Daniel et al. 2021. “Saúde e migrações: a pandemia de Covid-19 e os trabalhadores imigrantes nos frigoríficos do Sul do Brasil”. *Horizontes Antropológicos*, 27(59): 207-226.
- GRISOTTI, Marcia. 2020. “Pandemia de Covid-19: agenda de pesquisas em contextos de incertezas e contribuições das ciências sociais”. *Physis: Revista de Saúde Coletiva*, 30(2): 1-7.
- GROSSI, Miram; TONIOL, Rodrigo. (ed.). 2020. *Cientistas sociais e o coronavírus*. São Paulo: Anpocs.
- KECK, Frédéric. 2010. *Un monde grippé*. Paris: Flammarion.
- LATOUR, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- LATOUR, Bruno. 2017. *Facing Gaia: Eight lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- MASTRANGELO, Andrea; SEGATA, Jean; RICO, Ana. 2020. “COVID-19 en América Latina: desigualdad social y pandemia”. *AVÁ*, 37: 1851-1694.
- MOL, Annemarie. 2002. *The body multiple: ontology in medical practice*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- REDE VÍRUS MCTI. 2021. “Informe 03 - Rede Covid-19 Humanidades MCTI”, 10 de junho de 2021. Available at: <https://www.gov.br/mcti/pt-br/coronavirus/informes-rede-covid-19-humanidades-mcti/informe-3-rede-covid-19-humanidades-mcti>. Accessed on March 15, 2022.

- SCOPEL, Daniel et al. 2021. “Os povos indígenas e a Covid-19”. *Espaço Ameríndio*, 15(2): 1-16.
- SEGATA, Jean. 2020. “Covid-19, biossegurança e antropologia”. *Horizontes Antropológicos*, 26(57): 275-313.
- SEGATA, Jean; BECK, Luiza; MUCCILLO, Luísa. 2021. “Beyond exotic wet markets: Covid-19 ecologies in the global meat-processing industry in Brazil”. *eTropic - Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics*, 20(1): 94-115.
- SEGATA, Jean et al. 2021. “A Covid-19 e suas múltiplas pandemias”. *Horizontes Antropológicos*, 27(59): 7-25.
- SEGATA, Jean et al. 2022. “Ungesunde Ökologien, prekäre Arbeit und Pandemie in der globalisierten Fleischindustrie im Süden Brasiliens”. *Peripherie - Politik, Ökonomie, Kultur*, 164(4): 386-404.
- SINGER, Merryll; RILKO-BAUER, Barbara. 2021. “The syndemics and structural violence of the COVID pandemic: anthropological insights on a crisis”. *Open Anthropological Research*, 1: 7-32.
- SCHUCH, Patrice; VÍCTORA, Ceres; SIQUEIRA, Monalisa Dias. 2021. “Cuidado e controle na gestão da velhice em tempos de Covid-19”. In: Gustavo Matta; Sérgio Rego; Ester Souto; Jean Segata (eds.), *Os impactos sociais da Covid-19 no Brasil: populações vulnerabilizadas e respostas à pandemia*. Rio de Janeiro: Observatório Covid 19/ Editora FIOCRUZ. pp. 149-157.
- TORALES, Julio et al. 2020. “The outbreak of COVID-19 coronavirus and its impact on global mental health”. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 66(4): 317-320.
- VENTURA, Deisy de Freitas L.; AITH, Fernando Mussa A.; REIS, Rossana Rocha. 2021. “Estratégia federal de disseminação da Covid-19: um ataque sem precedentes aos direitos humanos”. In: Tadeu Breda (ed.), *Bolsonaro genocida*. São Paulo: Editora Elefante. pp. 21-29.

Jean Segata

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2544-0745>

Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul

Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil

Email: jeansegata@ufrgs.br

Marcia Grisotti

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0389-7100>

Federal University of Santa Catarina

Florianópolis, SC, Brazil

Email: marcia.grisotti@ufsc.br

Rozeli Porto

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5318-1931>

Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte

Natal, RN, Brazil

E-mail: rozeliporto@gmail.com