

*vibrant*

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Dossiers

**Ethnography of Governance Institutions**

**Utopias of Recycling and Circularity**

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# *vibrant*

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# Ethnography, beyond the limits of the global present

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Issue 20 (2023) of *Vibrant* comprises our regular *Articles* section and two dossiers: *Ethnography of Governance Institutions* and *Utopias of Recycling and Circularity* – a total of 37 texts covering themes of contemporary relevance, revealing, from different angles, the marks of an increasingly dystopian global reality, as complex as it is interdependent. Although most of the authors published here are Brazilian, the issue also reflects the growing participation of foreign academics as authors or coauthors – our collaborators in networks of cooperation and dialogue, a clear demonstration of the internationalization of the discipline in Brazil, along with the presence of Brazilian anthropologists in other national contexts.

The texts thus explore Brazilian contexts but also those of Mexico, South Africa, Cape Verde, the Netherlands, Argentina and Uruguay. All these scenarios are approached in terms of both urban and rural settings, among citizens of the peripheries and indigenous peoples. From field research based on ethnographic observation to the study of archives and literary texts, the limits of ethnography as an epistemic perspective are expanded and creatively delimited. This scenario shows that even with the interruption of funding for research in Brazil, which until then had been stimulating anthropological research outside the country (Schuch, 2018), this facet of internationalization has proved consistent and still capable of renewing itself, generating new lines of inquiry.



Many of the texts from the *Articles* section are strongly marked by the discipline's contemporary setting, whether this involves the study of techniques and human/non-human relations, or the intersections that produce and perpetuate durable inequalities (Tilly, 1998). But they also address the profound social impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, the theme of the dossier *COVID-19 in Brazil* (Segata, Grisotti & Porto, 2022). Additionally, evincing the effects of the international scenario described above, three of the eight texts from the section focus on non-Brazilian contexts, namely those of South Africa, Cape Verde and Mexico – the latter explored in a comparative perspective with Brazil. As well as comprising locations where ethnographic research is being conducted, the dialogues developed in the articles demonstrate the horizontal internationalization of the anthropology produced in Brazil through diverse South-South networks (Ribeiro, 2018).

The dossier *Ethnography of Governance Institutions* (Teixeira, Crewe & Bernardes, 2023), firmly anchored in the experience of research laboratory groups and networks of scientific dialogue and debate (see Castilho, Lima & Teixeira, 2014; Teixeira, Lobo & Abreu, 2019), confronts us with the metamorphoses of authoritarian traditions of governance and their transformations in the contemporary era. Here too, ethnographic exploration of contemporaneity, especially the dimensions of the global shift(s) towards the far right, reveals the twisting complexities of the mixture of forms deeply rooted in the colonial and servile past of Latin America (but not only) with neoliberal management technologies. Brazil's recent history surfaces in a number of investigations on themes as wide-ranging as the management of sexuality and the recruitment and structuring of public administration in Brazil, also including police action, hospitals, forums for social participation and other themes. International borders, the legislature during the period 2019-2022, or the relations between anthropology and agribusiness are just some of the aspects that demonstrate the scope and capacity for a scientifically-based elaboration of 'hot topics,' perhaps the main reason why we need to keep asking ourselves "Who's afraid of anthropologists?" (Machado, Motta & Facchini, 2018; Machado & Motta, 2019).

*Utopias of Recycling and Circularity* (Caje & Arisi, 2023) brings ethnographic experience to the inquiry into the social processes involved in the management of solid waste – 'garbage' – continuing the investigations of a consolidated network of researchers working in countries like Argentina, Brazil, the Netherlands and Uruguay published in a series of recent works (see Rial, 2016). This thematic framework reveals the quickening transformations of a global world increasingly left to deal with the deleterious effects of capitalist production, including impacts on the environment, and the emergence of 'solutions' whose limits never cease to become apparent and overcome, generally at small scales. The dossier's texts highlight the tensions of the present and the plausibility of dystopian futures, showing us how an anthropology engaged in the Brazilian setting is directly linked to global circuits and tensions.

So we complete 20 years of *Virtual Brazilian Anthropology – Vibrant*, more than ever situated among our discipline's contemporary theoretical trends and assured that the journal continues to fulfil its remit of promoting the internationalization of Brazilian anthropological production, now deeply intertwined in the international scenarios and networks of the discipline in the Global North and the South. And it does so through ethnographically dense explorations of some of the most critical problems of our contemporary historical moment and our immediate future.

Translated by: David A. Rodgers

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# Mass Death and Disappearance in Contemporary Necropolitical Democracies: Brazilian and Mexican cases

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## Abstract

Based on ethnographic research in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Sonora, Mexico, we analyze mass deaths and disappearances under (formally) democratic regimes. A comparison by contrast reveals the similarities and differences between these two places. We establish a dialogue with the structural perspective of necropolitics and studies of victims' experiences in different national contexts. We seek to link the notion of the necropolitical environment with analysis of practices of valorization of human life. To do so, we start by analyzing the experiences of people whose lives, as well as those of their families, are socially devalued (valuation studies). The concept of *maternal body* emerges from this analysis, enabling us to understand the dynamics of friction between the necropolitical environment and the emergence of possible forms of life, defined on the basis of inter-corporeal links between the families and their dead or disappeared loved ones.

**Keywords:** death and disappearance; necropolitics; practices of valorization; maternal body: Brazil/Mexico.

# Morte e desaparecimento em massa em democracias necropolíticas contemporâneas: Casos brasileiro e mexicano

## Resumo

Fundamentando-nos nas pesquisas etnográficas que realizamos no estado do Rio de Janeiro, no Brasil, e na cidade de Sonora, no México, analisamos a morte e o desaparecimento em massa no quadro de regimes (formalmente) democráticos. Uma comparação por contraste permite-nos evidenciar dinâmicas de semelhanças e contrastes entre estes dois lugares. Estabelecemos um diálogo com a perspectiva estrutural da necropolítica e trabalhos que analisam experiências de vítimas em diferentes contextos nacionais. Propomos relacionar a noção de ambiente necropolítico com uma análise de práticas de valorização da vida humana. Para tanto, partimos dos pontos de vista de experiências de pessoas cujas vidas, bem como aquelas de familiares e próximos, são socialmente desvalorizadas (*valuation studies*). Desta análise emerge a noção de corpo materno que nos permite compreender dinâmicas de fricção entre o ambiente necropolítica e a emergência de formas de vidas possíveis, definidas a partir de laços intercorporais entre as famílias e os entes queridos mortos ou desaparecidos.

**Palavras-chave:** morte e desaparecimento; necropolítica; pratica de valorização ; corpo materno: Brasil/México.

# Mass Death and Disappearance in Contemporary Necropolitical Democracies: Brazilian and Mexican cases

Paola Díaz; Jussara Freire

In recent years, political demands and movements that mobilize in the simple defense of human life have multiplied across the globe. We have seen large-scale protest movements such as Black Lives Matter, which took shape in 2013 in the United States later appeared in several countries such as Brazil and France. In Latin America, the movement against femicide emerged in Argentina in 2015 with the slogan “Ni una menos” (“Not one more killed”) and has since spread across the continent and beyond. On the United States-Mexico border, the grassroots organization “No More Death” condemns the death of migrants who attempt to cross the border, searches for the people who have disappeared in the Sonoran Desert and honors the memory of those who have died.

These movements defend the conviction that such “wasted lives” (Bauman, 2004) should be valued precisely because they were formed in response to the documentation of violence illustrating the extent to which these lives are devalued or under-valued compared to other human life.

Common to these types of political demands is their development within democratic countries which are not at war and which adhere to international principles regarding the protection of human rights. Death is not circumscribed by a specific period of extreme violence, like in dictatorship and totalitarian regimes, but operates rather as a part of everyday life, only rarely becoming a public event, such as in the case of George Floyd’s death in 2020. As documented by Fassin (2015, 2018), social inequalities, which are often chronic and invisible, such as access to health care, go hand in hand with inequalities in the face of direct violence.

Regardless of the specific population in question, all these movements make visible—through claims regarding the value of such lives—the systematic nature of death, disappearance and violence experienced by certain categories of people.

On one level, the large-scale death and disappearance of particular groups and individuals—in certain cases, people of color—has been studied through the notion of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003), defined as a form of sovereignty (not exclusive to the State) which functions on the production of physical or social death and which is rooted in the hierarchization of human life. Like colonization and slavery, this sovereignty has a long history and continues to operate within contemporary liberal democracies.

On another level, the consequences of violence, death and disappearance have been analyzed in relation to the subjective experience of victims and survivors, as Das *et al.* (2000, 2001) and Kleinman *et. al* (1997) have investigated in anthropology. Such works describe not only tragic *pathos*, but also the experiences of victims, their suffering and the ways in which they are able to cultivate an existence after events marked by violence or devastation.

Using ethnographic research on parents of disappeared and murdered persons in the state of Sonora in northern Mexico and in poor neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro, this article aims to analyze the relationship between contemporary systems of necropolitics which devalue certain lives and the practices of valorization and care of lives by parents of victims. This relationship is studied through the lens of what we refer to as the *maternal body*, which we consider to be a site of *friction* between a logic which negates the value of certain

lives as well as a practice of valorization and care of these lost lives. Through these objectives, we hope to address two aspects of the phenomenon: the systems in and through which violence is generated, and the lived experience of this violence by the victims.

The phenomenon of necropolitics in democratic regimes is not limited to the Global South, however we chose to analyze the cases of Brazil and Mexico because of their particularly salient necropolitical dynamics, revealed through the large number of deaths and disappearances, increasingly cruel forms of killing and the growing impunity of corrupt institutions (Santos, 2020).

The first part of this article situates our approach and presents key concepts used to understand the experiences of mothers of dead and disappeared persons in Mexico and Brazil. During our respective fieldwork, we met women who were the wives, sisters and daughters of a disappeared person but, in this article, we focus on the figure of the mother because of the centrality she acquires in the environments where we investigated.

The second part discusses our analyses with regards to three primary dimensions: necropolitics that operate in the social spaces studied; practices which valorize lost lives; and the maternal body as the site of friction between necropolitical systems and the practices of valuing and care. We will conclude by reflecting on the new cultural and political arrangements that the presence of these mothers and their bodies, seen as sites of friction, could produce.

## **Objectivity of Violence and Subjectivity of Victims**

The question of the death and disappearance of individuals seen as being of less value has been particularly studied in terms of the systems that produce these phenomena, the normative frameworks of (de)valorization of lives and the lived experiences of violence by victims and survivors. We will briefly revisit these approaches, while also elaborating our own research perspective.

In recent decades, the analysis of the large-scale death and disappearance of certain categories of the population builds upon notions that are increasingly utilized by authors. Biopolitics (Foucault, 2004), necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003), thanatopolitics, the state of exception and bare life (Agamben, 1998) are among the most mobilized concepts in diverse sub-disciplines such as migration studies, post-colonial studies and critical geography.

Central to these approaches is the attempt to explain the origins of these phenomena using global social systems. Whether referred to as institutions, structures or apparatuses, it is a question of systems of power that kill, allow to die or disappear migrants, poor people and Black people, among others.

In addition to these approaches, which objectivize the causes of large-scale death, one also finds works that study the impacts of violent death and disappearance on victims and survivors, in other words, that study the subjectivity of victims. From classical literature on testimony, especially concerning victims of the Holocaust (Feldman & Laud, 1992), we turn today to anthropological studies on suffering (Das *et.al.* 2000, 2001; Kleinman *et.al.*, 1997; Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). This research is less centered on the accounts of witnesses than on the ordinary or everyday practices of survivors, including the ability or inability to experience grief, affective and physical wounds as well the silence surrounding death and disappearance. These anthropological studies have guided our approach and will orient a situated analysis of the valuing of life in the context of necropolitics.

In the cases of Brazil and Mexico, there has been extensive research into mass deaths and disappearances in contemporary times. As we develop our description and argument, we will draw on this work, especially that addressing the question central to our work, namely, what the bodies of mothers do in and with a necropolitical environment (Vianna 2014, 2015; Diéguez, 2013, 2021).

## Necropolitical spaces and frames of war

Building on the work of Mbembe, who understands necropolitics as “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” (Mbembe, 2003: 39), we define a *necropolitical environment* as a social assemblage that contributes to the production of death and disappearance as agents of necropower or the sovereignty to bring about, or expose someone to, death or disappearance. An assemblage is a diverse group of social actors and devices (which can be political, economic or humanitarian) that functions within a flexible and transforming relationship. The assemblage does not follow a single logic, but rather functions according to several definitions (Ong & Collier, 2004).

In Sonora and Rio, we carried out observations in different everyday necropower situations where sovereignty exerts itself not only through policies tied to increasingly militarized and deadly state security policies, but also in the broader context of a social assemblage of both legal and illegal socio-political and economics orders. These orders operate according to diverse forms of racial and class discrimination and comprise various mechanisms of exploitation: in the case of Sonora, the economic orders are particularly extractive while, in the case of Rio de Janeiro, the socio-political order is manifested through the city’s neoliberal governance.

While armed groups (the police, the army, militias and criminal organizations) are directly responsible for physical death or disappearance, we assert that the social assemblage in

its entirety is what allows for the production and reproduction of large-scale death and disappearance in these locations<sup>1</sup>.

Usually these deaths do not result in public outcry or elicit moral indignation on the part of the population not directly affected by the violence. Although certain high-profile deadly events led to collective mobilization, as in the case of the 43 students (from Ayotzinapa, Mexico) who disappeared in 2014, the majority of these daily deaths and disappearances silently add to an already-normalized death and disappearance count. The fact that some deaths/disappearances draw attention while others do not is at the core of studies on the value attributed to the lives of certain subjects (Butler, 2004, 2009; Fassin, 2015, 2018), the disposability of certain segments of the population (Bauman, 2004) and the commodification of life and the body (Satz, 2010). The works of Butler examine “the norms by which the ‘human’ is constituted” (Butler, 2004: 46), that is to say, the frames that establish cognitive, ontological and political norms defining what counts as a valuable life, worthy of being mourned.

Butler’s frames of reference also address social conditions that support these lives (health, education, housing, etc.)—forms of support that can be understood as political decisions: “The frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable) are politically saturated” (Butler, 2009: 1). According to Butler, these frames are constantly reproduced, but not necessarily always repeated because such reproduction can also lead the frames to collapse, which in turn brings about the collapse of norms that condition the value of lives as well as the recognition of this value.

Drawing on the works of Butler, our analysis seeks to link the normative frames that condition the value of life with everyday practices that produce, reproduce and potentially transform these frames. To do this, we used heuristic tools from three perspectives: pragmatist theories of valuation; the notion of care; and the anthropology of suffering. The last two highlight the issue of the body, which helps us to conceptualize the maternal body.

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<sup>1</sup> Understanding the necropolitical environment in terms of its functioning through complex and interconnected assemblies is not to fuel a perspective that would seek, in one way or another, to exonerate the material perpetrators and the institutional context responsible for such crimes.



## Valuation, care and body

To describe our ethnographic fields analytically, we decided to examine necropolitical environments by situating them in relation to practices of valuation of life and care. Underpinning both elements is the question of the body: the body of the deceased or disappeared person and the body of the loved one who mourns such a loss.

Situated practices of valuation (Lamont, 2012; Dewey 1939) are a socially situated process centered around two poles: valuing (forms of immediate emotional and sensory appreciation that involve caring for or rejecting someone or something) and evaluation (reflective assessment based on valuing). According to Dewey (1939), valuing corresponds to a sensibility whereas evaluation implies comparing and examining causes and consequences. In our analyses, we are particularly attentive to valuing since it represents an emotional and moral practice central to the mothers with whom we spoke. They attribute value to the lives of their missing children without using equivalents or comparisons. Quite the opposite, these mothers endow their children with an unconditional value that designates them as beings of absolute and immeasurable worth. While the theory of valuation is useful for analyzing normative frames within the context of everyday practices, the perspective of care is all the more instructive regarding the attention putted to the particular and irreplaceable loved ones.

According to a classic definition, care is “[...] a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Tronto, 1993:103). To this idea of a life-sustaining web, we must also add the lives and bodies of others and, particularly in the case of the mothers of the disappeared, the life and bodies of their loved ones.

Tronto identifies several aspects of care: caring about, taking care of, caregiving and care receiving. In the gendered division of pain (Das, 1996), caregiving and taking care of missing children are roles fully taken on by mothers. The action of “caring about” is especially useful for understanding how devalued lives are valued in necropolitical spaces. Caring about refers to the sensory and perceptive ability to be attentive to others, in the sense of recognizing them (and thus recognizing their value) and recognizing their vulnerability. In the case of mothers caring about their lost children, the relationship is often naturalized and reduced to the natural feelings of love that a mother has or has to have toward her children. Beyond the “mothering mandate” in patriarchal societies such as Brazil and Mexico (Segato, 2016), this attention to one person—to a daughter or son in particular and the unique bond built with him or her—makes it possible to understand caring about as a more general practice of restoring value to these lives, in opposition to necropolitics and indifference.

The attribution of value does not only occur through discourse, but also by way of the body and the sharing of suffering (Das, 1996). The expression of pain, in the case of the mothers with whom we spoke, manifests as laments (crying, moaning and yelling) as well as through physical pain and illness. We can read in these expressions of suffering a call to recognize the importance of the life, death or disappearance of the child. Such is how Das describes it: “If, however, pain destroys one’s capacity to communicate, how can it ever be brought into the sphere of public articulation? It is my submission that the expression of pain is an invitation to share” (Das, 1996: 194).

To share can mean compassion (to suffer with) or even to step in for another and act as “one body” (Leder, 1990). This sharing can build a moral community or a *communitas* (Diéguez, 2021) in the midst of pain, as in the case of groups that search for the missing in northern Mexico. Yet this is not always the case for the mothers living in the favelas and suburbs of the state of Rio de Janeiro.

However, in Brazil and Mexico, the maternal body, can also be understood as a corporal connection with the lost child—a connection through which the maternal body becomes the extension of the child’s missing body and can also represent a political presence within the public sphere. Diéguez calls this a liminal body,

referring also to an “extended body of a mother that supports the absence of the son, of the daughter, as double bodies of the piétas” (Diéguez, 2021: 17). In court cases and the collective actions of families and activists for young people murdered in Rio, Vianna (2014, 2015) notes that the central symbolic figure of all this process is the mother-son dyad where the mother’s body, as she calls it, turns into “a support and a language of a perennial injustice” (Vianna, 2014: 235).

By connecting Das’s analyses, regarding sharing and the expression of pain, with Butler’s proposition, concerning the frames that allow for (or not) the recognition of the value of certain lives, we can assert that the expression of pain in the maternal body and the embodiment of the child’s absent body, is the expression of the *friction* between, on the one hand, the necropolitical environments which deny the value of these lives and, on the other, the valuing and forms of care that these parents reattribute to these lives. Thus, the body of the mother as a support can be conceived as a maternal body, a category that refers to a process where the mother’s body can function as an operator of transformation of the frames of valuation of lives, deaths and disappearances in a necropolitical environment.

Here we have adopted the metaphor of friction used by Tsing to describe the destruction, but also the resistance to extractivist practices: “A wheel turns because of its encounter with the surface of the road [...] As a metaphorical image, friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounter can lead to new arrangements of culture and power” (Tsing, 2005: 5).

### **Everyday death and disappearance: From Rio de Janeiro to Sonora**

This article is based on several ethnographic studies and interviews of family members (particularly mothers<sup>2</sup>) of murdered and disappeared persons. Ethnographic observation was conducted in Hermosillo, the capital of the state of Sonora which borders the United States in northern Mexico. In 2019, we accompanied families of disappeared people in their search for clandestine graves in the city and the surrounding countryside. We also conducted 15 unstructured interviews (between 2019 and 2020) with 7 mothers and 8 daughters and sisters of men—between 19 and 40 years old—who disappeared between 2018 and 2020 in three cities of Sonora: Hermosillo, Guaymas and Caborca.

In Brazil, multiple ethnographic studies were carried out with people living in peri-urban zones and favelas of the state of Rio de Janeiro (Araújo, 2007; 2014; Barros & Farias, 2017). This article is based on our work conducted between 2017 and 2019 in two cities: Rio de Janeiro (henceforth referred to as Rio) and Campos dos Goytacazes. We also draw on 15 interviews with the mothers of murdered and disappeared youth by macrotraffickers, militias or the police. These unstructured interviews were conducted with 8 mothers in the north of Rio state and 7 mothers living in and around the city of Rio.

By taking these two cases, we do not intend to do a classical comparative study of two national contexts (Sanjurjo, 2017). Rather, basing on these cases allows us a cross-sectional analysis (in two socio-historical situations) of the relationship between global necropolitical dynamics and valuation practices embodied in relations of affection and bodies.

In these two sites, the necropolitical environment can be reconstructed from descriptions of multiple situations of daily life experienced during our fieldwork. However, we opt to provide a general overview, using figures to highlight the massive and systematic nature of the necropolitical machine. We know that, in Brazil and Mexico, official reporting should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless the figures underscore the considerable scale of the phenomenon.

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<sup>2</sup> We have changed the names of the interviewees cited in this article.

In Brazil, between 2009 and 2016, 57,956 deaths were registered, of which 21,762 resulted from “police intervention”, to use the official term. In 2020 alone, deaths associated with police violence rose by 19.6%, or 6,220 (FBSP). Based on these numbers, it is clear that the Brazilian police is the most lethal police force in the world (Zilli, 2018).

In Mexico, security forces (different police units and armed forces) have been accused of having participated in homicides and disappearances, with members of the district attorney’s office facing accusations of corruption and negligence. Multiple criminal groups are also responsible for crimes often committed in collusion with security forces. According to official figures, more than 360,00 homicide victims (INEGI, 2022) and more than 100,000 disappeared people (CNB, 2022) have been registered between 2006 and 2022.

Although the necropolitical environments of these two countries are shaped by characteristics unique to their specific histories, in both cases, death and disappearance on a large scale is strongly associated with ways in which violence is framed and handled. In both countries, the issue of so-called “criminal” violence is conceptualized in relation to the metaphor of war (Leite, 2000; Escalante, 2013). One finds that two primary war paradigms coexist simultaneously: the “war *between* narcotraffickers” and the “war *on* narcotrafficking” or the “war *on* drugs”.

In the official discourse, death and disappearance is overwhelmingly attributed to wars between criminal organizations over territorial control. These deaths and disappearances define hierarchies of disposability and the value of human life. On the one hand, the fatalities of these wars, defined as “internal” conflicts between criminals, are not mourned in the way the deaths of innocent citizens would be. As the saying goes in Brazil, “a good thief is a dead thief”. Essentially, these deaths do not represent a loss, but rather a gain. On the other hand, within these groups tied to criminal activity, there also exists a hierarchy of the value of life. Those at the bottom of the illegal economy (neighborhood drug dealers, amateur lookouts and hitmen, or *sicarios*) are the most vulnerable and the least mourned.

The metaphor of war also includes the “war *on* narcotrafficking” that entails security policies designed by government institutions and military interventions. In this case, war presents itself as a solution to the “crime problem” directly tied to the trade and use of drugs. In Brazil, this war translates into the creation of spheres of exception within poor neighborhoods where police act arbitrarily and with total impunity (Grillo, 2016). Such was the case, for example, during the violent armed confrontation triggered by the intervention of the Peacekeeping Police Unit (UPP), created by the government to fight drug trafficking in several cities in Rio state between 2008 and 2014 (Hirata & Grillo, 2019).

In Mexico, the war on narcotrafficking officially began with the “Joint Michoacan Operation” announced by President Calderón (2006-2012) in December 2006. The operation, which deployed the army and police units, was subsequently expanded throughout the country, in the context of security cooperation agreements with United States (Hunt, 2019). Like in Brazil, militarization did not reduce illegal trafficking or crime—on the contrary, it led to a rise in deaths and disappearances.

These necropolitical environments are not backdrops to action, but are rather real agents of death and disappearance, constituting an assemblage of legal and illegal powers. They exert sovereignty over militarized territories, over populations reduced to silence and fear, and over the body of people branded “disposable” and “disappearable” (Barros & Farias, 2017; Wright, 2018). The disregard for these bodies is a disregard for the value of these lives and deaths. However, within these necropolitical environments, we also observe practices of positive valuing and care by families of dead and disappeared persons, as we will see in the following section.

## The dead and disappeared: valuing the devalued and unvalued

Based on our research, it is clear that a considerable number of murders and disappearances in Sonora and Rio are tied to the illegal drug economy with the involvement of state agents, whether through trafficking or through the war on drugs. All this takes place in a context of deep social inequality and racial discrimination and, in the case of Rio, extreme urban segregation (Cordera & Provencio, 2020; Machado da Silva, 2008). Historically in Brazil, the “disposable” category has been Afro-Brazilian, which leads Nascimento (2017) to speak of “black genocide” and structural racism.

Those who find themselves at the heart of the necropolitical assemblage can be characterized as the *underclass of illegal trafficking*, which includes small-scale drugs dealers, lookouts, soldiers and *sicarios*. These groups of young men are more vulnerable to death and disappearance, due to conflicts between narcotrafficking groups, confrontations with the police, the army or militias in Rio. They may also face violence because of a debt or after being accused of working for a rival group.

Yet in Rio and Sonora, many young people die or disappear entirely because they consume drugs without selling them. As a mother of a young man who disappeared in Sonora indicated: “I noticed that in these situations, there are many of our families. Young people will buy drugs in the street and they get kidnapped”. Consuming drugs or associating with a dealer can lead to death or disappearance and in Rio, being young and black is enough to be suspected of participating in trafficking. Such is how Moema’s son was killed: “the police officer shot him in the back because he saw a young black man living in a favela and he figured he was a drug trafficker”.

Other parents describe the death and disappearance of their children in completely random circumstances, simply finding oneself in the wrong place at the wrong time or being the victim of mistaken identity by police or the mafia.

In both Sonora and Rio, regardless of the reasons behind the death and disappearances, all these young people are suspected of having done something wrong, according to Karen, the mother of a young man who disappeared in 2019 in Sonora: “unfortunately in our society, disappeared people are considered criminals and I don’t doubt that a lot of criminals have disappeared, but that’s not the point. The point is that no one has the right to hold someone against their will, and much less to make them disappear”. In Rio, Julia tells us that young people are seen as “criminals who deserve to die”.

The lower value placed on the life of these young people can also be observed within the justice system. When families decide to file complaints, despite fear, threats and distrust of legal institutions, the investigations lead nowhere and the crimes remain unpunished. In Sonora, after Carmen reported the disappearance of her son, an investigator came to her house “only to figure out what we knew because he had been involved in my son’s disappearance”. Similarly, most parents that we met in Rio don’t file a complaint since, as in Louisa and Lilian’s case, the people responsible for the murder are connected to the neighborhood precinct.

Whether through negligence or corruption, legal institutions do not advance investigations and as a result, there is practically no sentencing (Colectivo vs. Impunidad, 2020; Nery & Nadanovsky, 2020). Since the killing or disappearance of these young people does not have any consequences, for the families, impunity translates into disdain and reproduces violence. According to Angelica, who has been searching for her son who disappeared in 2020 in Sonora, these young people are not considered important: “if they were the sons of politicians, [the investigators] would have turned the earth upside down to find them and serve justice. But us ordinary people don’t get justice”.

In Brazil and Mexico, these young people are clearly devalued by being categorized as delinquents, criminals or suspected wrong doers. This stigmatization can be seen in the words of Maura from Rio: “When you arrive at the police station, you give the name [of the disappeared child], they see if the person has a criminal record and if so, the police don’t care about the case”. Within the social narrative, these young people are essentially

seen as responsible for their own misfortune and society's problems more generally. On the contrary, the parents—mothers in this case—that we met associate “evil” with society, the state and criminal groups, rather than with their loved ones.

These women defend the value of their children as human beings who deserve not to be killed or disappeared, as in the words of Karen, “no one has the right” to kill them or make them disappear. Yet this humanization is not a generalized process based on universal principles, but rather individualized (Freire, 2017; Díaz, 2018). As Anna of Sonora explains, “people treat them like delinquents, but to me he is my son. Regardless of what he may or may not have done, I love him and miss him so much”. We could also take the example of Carolina, who describes how she addresses the police involved in the kidnapping of her son: “You didn’t take a dog. You took part of my life. He’s my son, my flesh, my heart”. In Brazil, these mothers portray the loss of their children in similar ways. Geovana tells us that “we [the parents] always encouraged him to have a better life, but he was a good son and always said he was going to make it, but he didn’t get the chance”. Thus, through affective valuing, these women and mothers attribute a positive value to their loved ones.

In Sonora, where groups looking for disappeared people began forming in 2019, we were able to observe certain valuing practices. When these women traverse the countryside looking for clandestine graves, they speak lovingly to the missing: “We speak to them with beautiful words to try to find them. We ask them to reveal themselves so that we can take them out of this horrible place, return them home, give them a dignified grave and let them and their families be in peace”.

In Mexico, forms of killing have become increasingly cruel (Diéguez, 2013; Robledo, 2016). The remains recovered by women attest to this: “We find them dismembered, chained, beheaded or burned”, says Francisca, a young woman searching for her brother. “They dissolve them in acid and sometimes we only find traces of human fat”. As in the accounts of extermination camp survivors, family members are compelled to affirm the humanity of these individuals. The women searching for graves also emphasize the humanity of their loved ones: “We have found many remains, reduced to bones, that have been thrown around and scattered. A skull here, a backbone there. We then reassemble the bones with a lot of love and respect. Because it’s a human being” (Karen). Carefully arranging and touching the bones is a form of caring about their loved ones and the disappeared in general. The remains contain an emotional and moral value, which are not merely forensic evidence, but ‘treasures’, as many describe them.

In Rio, while certain mothers are heavily involved in the mother’s collectives (Birman & Leite, 2004; Leite, 2004; Vianna & Farias, 2011; Vianna, 2014, 2015), it is less the case for the mothers we met. Some refuse to join the collectives due to the risk and in order to protect their other children. Others do not participate because of the “loss of any faith in society’s justice,” to quote Lilian. These mothers restore their children’s humanity in the privacy of their home, by leaving the dead child’s bedroom untouched, by keeping his or her clothes or even by visibly displaying photographs of them around the house or in well-kept albums. Some turn to the church and “pray for them”, lighting altar candles and connecting spiritually with their children. The affective valuing practiced by Mexican women searching for graves manifests for Brazilian mothers through the work of memory: by nurturing the memory of their children, they continue to take care of them.

As we have shown, for these women the valuing of dead and missing loved ones is a singular process that is not centered around universal principles of human value, but rather particular emotional and blood ties since, for the women, a part of them has been ripped away. In the final section of this article, we will analyze the role of these women’s bodies, and in particular the maternal body, in the valuing of lost loved ones as a figure that challenges the necropolitical order.

## Maternal body

The concept of necropolitics, as defined by Mbembe (2003), underscores the importance of corporality and, as we see with Foucault (2004), questions of sovereignty and power are framed around the ways in which power shapes the bodies of subjects. In both sites of field research, necropolitics is embodied in the remains of the young murdered and disappeared people, but also in the bodies of their mothers, which we refer to as the *maternal body*. As argued above, this category does not intend to essentialize the mother, her body, or maternity, but rather conceptualizes the maternal body as a body-subject understood as an embodied experience of the world, others and oneself (Merleau Ponty, 1976). The maternal body can be considered as a physical and symbolic incarnation of the pain of absence and loss, as a body-to-body connection visible in the public sphere.

This image of the maternal body as the incarnation of pain is particularly apparent at the time of the child's disappearance. The mothers in Sonora explain that they felt in their bodies and especially in their hearts that something bad had happened to their children at the exact time of their abduction. Carmen tells us that "he was taken away at 12:15 a.m and at that moment, as they took him away, I felt a pain in my heart, a twinge. This is the bond, the love so strong between mother and son". For Lucia, a Brazilian mother, this heart pain expressed itself through crying: "He told me he was going to the corner of the street. But after waiting 20 hours for him to come back, all of a sudden, I screamed: 'They killed Paulo!' before anyone even told me". In these circumstances, the heart is the organ that represents love and it is there that mothers feel or foresee the loss of their children.

These mothers often describe the loss of a child as "an open wound". In the words of Laura from Rio, it constitutes "a wound that will never heal" and Carmen from Sonora describes it as a tearing away of "a piece of myself". The mothers experience this wound in their bodies and souls and the body/spirit binary disappears because the pain is both physical and emotional. Grief and physical affection are one and the same experience.

In Rio, some mothers of disappeared children became seriously ill following police arrests (Araujo, 2007). One mother, after learning from a witness that her child had been dismembered by the people who kidnapped him, developed an atrophy condition that led her to lose a finger. In the case of missing persons, complaints and investigations are long, draining and futile. The mother's body exhausts itself in the search for justice that typically leads nowhere (Freire, 2015).

The maternal body suffers, particularly from imagining the suffering of the child as *one body* (Leder, 1990), as in a body bonded to another by mutual suffering. However, the maternal body does not represent a fused body and the separation from the child is all the more intense since he or she is dead or missing. In this way the maternal body is rather a body-chiasmus: mother and child are united by and within the gap between presence and absence.

Regarding the maternal body as an inter-corporal tie, it can be seen as a type of continuation in which the mother, suffering from the grief of losing her child, becomes in some sense an extension of this absent body.

Studies have often underlined the extension of death and disappearance concerning the devastating consequences on the family and community (Araujo, 2014; Lira, 2010). Essentially, in Rio and Sonora, mothers often claim that following the disappearance of a child, the family is destroyed and that sometimes a heavy silence takes root around this absence, which fractures the family bond.

Necropolitics is devastating, as Juana of Sonora describes the perception of being half-alive: "I'm no longer really alive. The only reason I'm still living is to look for him" In Rio, we encountered several mothers who have considered or attempted suicide, such as Lucia: "he died the 23<sup>rd</sup>, I found him the 24<sup>th</sup> and he was buried the 25<sup>th</sup>. On the 26<sup>th</sup>, I tried to kill myself by taking poison". Of course, suicide is a manifestation of devastation, but also of the possibility of contact with the child: "I wanted to die in order to find him again and know where he went, what they did to him", says Lucia.

Without negating the destructive way in which this extension of violence impacts the family, in the case of these mothers, we would also like to draw attention to the creative role this extension plays in the creation of an inter-body link, both sensitive and emotional, between mother and child. The death and disappearance of a child breaks what Carmen of Sonora and Maura of Rio call “the law of life” whereby children bury their parents: “parents should pass away first, not them” says Carmen. This inversion of the natural order intersects with another type of reversal—that of the body’s natural order. Normally, the child represents the genetic continuity of their parents, yet in this case the mothers become, in a sense, the continuity of their offspring.

This extension occurs when mothers hold conversations with their absent children, speaking directly to their photos at home. They fill a void left by their sons’ absence with their own voice, at times laughing, at times through imagined dialogue or prayers. In Rio especially, the connection with the children is maintained through prayers which provide a sense of continuity with the child’s life by essentially putting into perspective the finiteness of the human body in order to share a spiritual space with their children.

The mothers looking for their missing children in clandestine graves in Sonora speak to them during their search. However, this connection is not only formed through linguistic communication. In both countries, the mothers often dream of a bodily connection with their children, of a kiss, of an embrace or of the child’s head resting on their shoulder. As Maria of Sonora explains, “I dreamed of him, he came, he held me in his arms”. In Rio, mothers describe the discussions they have with their sons in dreams. “Sometimes I dream very deeply. He’s there speaking to me, playing in front of me”, says Laura who emphasizes the word “there” as if her child was physically present in the same room.

The mother/child inter-body link can be built through certain talisman objects, such as the missing child’s clothes. For example, Karen of Sonora sleeps with the T-shirt of her child over her eyes. The expansion of the son’s body on the body of the mother also takes the form of accessories with the name of the child, which mark the body. Such is the case with Ana, who got a tattoo illustrating her son’s absence, which she accompanied with posts published on Facebook: “There are things that are tattooed without ink, like the loss of my son”.

**Figure 1.** The tattoo on Ana’s arm with the initial of her son “K”, who disappeared in March 2020 in Sonora (Photo author 1)



In this situation, the maternal body becomes the site of an inter-body link within the flesh. Importantly, this tattoo accompanied by public words also reveals that the maternal body can become present in the public sphere. In these cases, the mother's body *carries* the presence of the child, as seen in Rio when mothers who have filed complaints, appear in court with the photo of their children on their T-shirts. It can also be observed when Mexican mothers go out in search of their children, participate in marches or fundraise in the streets, wearing the photo of the missing loved one on their chests.

The cases presented in Sonora and Rio do not concern political causes, at least according to the terms used by victims' family groups that existed under military dictatorships of the 1970s in the Southern Cone of South America (Díaz, 2014; Sanjurjo, 2017). The majority of the families interviewed for this research do not call for truth or justice and believe more in divine justice than in the worldly kind. Nevertheless, we can still identify a politics of presence each time the cries and bodies of these mothers constitute a disturbance. Take the case of Carmen, for example, who went to identify her son, disappeared in 2018, at the morgue after having found his body in 2020 in a clandestine grave in Sonora and was asked to stop crying so loudly because it bothered the prosecutor who was in a meeting nearby. These suffering individuals are thus dreaded reminders of what indifferent citizens do not wish to see and of what authorities do not wish to investigate.

In this sense, the uncomfortable presence of the mothers' suffering bodies can be considered a way of publicizing death and disappearance, marking the presence of the missing in the mother's body, as also observed by Diéguez (2021) in her work with the mothers of disappeared people in Mexico. This publicization projects a unique and immeasurable relationship between mother and child into the public sphere. This assertion may seem an oxymoron, but this is because most publicization processes are forged from universalizable principles like truth and justice. In the case we have studied, neither truth nor justice (human) are very present, but the figure of the mother (Vianna, 2015) plays the role of an operator of universalization in the sense that everyone can identify with the mother-child relationship. Nevertheless, the process also has an irreducibly singular and non-universalizable aspect: each mother-child relationship and each loss is unique and irreplaceable. We argue that, in this singularity, mothers share (Das, 1996) the pain inhabiting their beings, their bodies, which can constitute a micropolitics of presence. The presence of the suffering mother disturbs us or invites us to understand what makes her suffer so much.

Thus, the presence of mothers could constitute the rejection of a necropolitical regime built around the participation of the State (through its actions or negligence) as well as various "machines of war" (the police, the army, the *sicarios*, the militias).

## Conclusions

In this article, we have shown the relationship between necropolitical environments in Sonora and Rio, as a vector of devaluation, death and disappearances of young people and the practices of affective valuing and care performed by families, and particularly mothers. From this relationship stems the figure of the maternal body—a body-subject where pain and grief express themselves. This is the site where an inter-body link forms with the absent loved one and the child's absent body extends into the present body of the mother.

This article concludes with a consideration of the political significance of the maternal body in situations of extreme violence. Within necropolitical assemblages described here, the child's death and disappearance reverse the natural order of bodies, lineage and carrying which open into a bodily space that we can understand as a site of friction between necropolitics and practices of valuing and care.

Of course, the mother's love and suffering, however deep and sincere, are part of a mandate of motherhood, that is, how a mother-woman must feel the affliction and loss. Nevertheless, it is from this same mandate that mothers' bodies can become a maternal body; an instance of friction of necropower.



As mentioned above, the friction metaphor draws on the image presented by Tsing (2005) of the wheel that turns thanks to the friction that exists between it and the road. Within necropolitical contexts, the encounter between the wheel and the road leads to death and disappearance, transforming into *spaces of death* (Taussig, 1984). It is in such a space that the wheel destroys lives and bodies, but it is also within this space that the maternal body, functioning as a one body with the missing body of the child, emerges as a key social figure.

The metaphor of friction is also used to represent what Tsing generally refers to as “new arrangements of culture and power” (Tsing, 2005: 5).

We propose to analyze the maternal body as a site of valuing and care which resists the devaluing of the lives of the disappeared, but also the devaluing of death resulting from disappearance. In this sense, the maternal body could be understood as a new cultural and political arrangement, because the maternal body compromises with death and disappearance, becoming the bearer of silent, forbidden or impossible mourning. These constitute forms of grief and impossible grief that transform the very meaning of liminality (Turner, 2008). Liminality has typically been conceived as a threshold which family members use to clearly delineate the boundaries of life and death through cultural rites. However, in contemporary necropolitical environments, liminality no longer constitutes a threshold, but rather a space in itself and a form of life. It can be considered an extended space in which one finds mothers’ bodies and more generally those who love the dead and missing persons. This liminal space is no longer a line or frontier to be crossed, but rather transforms into a texture connecting the lost loved one and those mourning their loss through the body and bodily expressions.

One can also interpret the maternal body as the site of a new political arrangement, in the broad sense of the term, and as a space of public life, since mothers become a bothersome presence (Loraux, 1990). Maternal bodies suffering like grains of sand in the wheel impede the smooth functioning of the machine. In the words of Das: “We find here a powerful political narrative in which criticisms of the excesses of a political program cannot be verbally expressed within that milieu but are literally carried by the body [...] the language of the body becomes criticism when the individual encounters events that are placed outside the flow of normal experience. (Das, 1996: 177-178)

The mere presence of mothers, “dead alive” (Fregoso, 2020) as they often describe themselves, can thus represent a manifestation of criticism or, at the very least, noise in the engine. Valuing and caring after their children and their memory is a humanizing act that could reintegrate these dead and missing persons into a lineage, a community and a memorial space. It represents a gest of affective care that incarnates a politics troubling a naturalized necropolitical order.

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# From public problems to social experiences: the alcohol ban in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

In 2020, the South African government adopted a controversial measure in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a nationwide ban on the sale and transport of alcoholic drinks. In this article, we explore the process that led to the construction of alcohol consumption as a “public problem” in the country, highlighting connections between alcohol drinking, politics, the economy, public health, public safety, and social inequality. We observe how the 2020 alcohol ban was decided upon, justified and enforced, following a long history of government attempts to control alcohol consumption among poor non-White South Africans. Based on ethnographic data, we present some patterns and meanings of alcohol consumption in popular settings and provide a glimpse into the drinking practices of more affluent South Africans during the alcohol ban. In doing so, we intend to offer a broader portrait of the phenomenon, one that helps grasp this intricate issue.

**Keywords:** South Africa; COVID-19 pandemic; alcohol drinking; alcohol ban; public problem; social inequality.

# De problemas públicos a experiências sociais: a proibição do álcool na África do Sul durante a pandemia de COVID-19

## Resumo

Em 2020, o governo sul-africano adotou uma medida polêmica em resposta à pandemia de COVID-19: a proibição nacional da venda e do transporte de bebidas alcoólicas. Neste artigo, exploramos o processo que levou à construção do consumo de álcool como um “problema público” no país, destacando as conexões entre consumo de álcool, política, economia, saúde pública, segurança pública e desigualdade social. Observamos como a proibição do álcool em 2020 foi decidida, justificada e aplicada, após uma longa história de tentativas do governo de controlar o consumo de álcool entre sul-africanos pobres não brancos. Com base em dados etnográficos, apresentamos alguns padrões e significados do consumo de álcool em ambientes populares e fornecemos um vislumbre das práticas de consumo de bebidas entre os sul-africanos mais ricos durante a proibição do álcool. Com isso, pretendemos oferecer um retrato mais amplo do fenômeno, que ajude a apreender essa intrincada questão.

**Palavras-chave:** África do Sul; pandemia de COVID-19; consumo de álcool; proibição de álcool; problema público; desigualdade social.



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## Introduction

*The role of drink in the lives of black men and women has a long history. And it is complex because it was never simply about drinking and drunkenness. (la Hausse 1988: 1)*

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a worldwide COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Reactions to the declaration varied. Some countries, like Brazil and the United States, struggled with alarmingly high death and contamination rates,<sup>2</sup> caused mainly by misleading political messages and actions<sup>3</sup>. Others, however, recognizing that COVID-19 was more than “just a flu”, implemented stringent regulations, including school and workplace closures, restrictions on public gatherings and stay-at-home requirements. In South Africa, the national government promptly recognized the menace of the virus and enacted one of the strictest government responses to the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> A nationwide ban on the sale and transport of alcoholic drinks was one of the many measures that the South African government took. Restrictions on alcohol consumption were established in many countries primarily through the closure of liquor stores, bars, and restaurants. Only South Africa and a few other countries did resort to a ban.<sup>5</sup>

Alcohol abuse is a severe social and health problem in South Africa. According to the 2018 Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health (WHO, 2018), the country has the world’s 6<sup>th</sup> highest rate of alcohol consumption per capita. More significantly, South Africa is marked by *binge* or *heavy drinking*, a phenomenon often associated with violence against women and children (Mager, 2010).<sup>6</sup> In this article we examine how the consumption of alcoholic drinks has been construed as a “public problem” during the pandemic in South Africa.

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2 On December 21, 2020, the United States had reached a total of 18,324,702 coronavirus cases and 325,295 deaths caused by COVID-19. By the same date, Brazil had 7,241,612 coronavirus cases and 186,818 deaths caused by COVID-19. See: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>.

3 For the Brazilian case, see the Dossier “COVID-19 in Brazil”, organized by Segata, Grisotti and Porto (2022), and the edited volume *Cientistas Sociais e o Coronavírus* (Grossi and Toniol, 2020).

4 Researchers at the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford brought forth a comprehensive dataset on the stringency of government responses to COVID-19 across the world, based on publicly available information. According to the study, South Africa implemented stricter policies than all European countries. See: <https://ourworldindata.org/policy-responses-covid>.

5 India, Thailand, Panama, Sri Lanka, and Botswana also banned alcohol sales nationwide due to the coronavirus.

6 The relationship between alcohol and intoxication and gender-based violence, also indicated by Wojcicki (2002), Pitpitan *et al.* (2013) and Bonner *et al.* (2019), will not be examined in the present article. We do acknowledge the two phenomena to be intertwined and think that their complexities deserve careful consideration.

To do so we follow the advice of Gusfield (1981) who highlights that not all sources of pain or struggles deserve this qualification.<sup>7</sup> According to the author, the main attribute of public problems is that they are perceived as potentially harmful to society as a whole, “instituted” (Bourdieu, 1996) as a matter that should be addressed collectively as a priority for governmental actions and public policy. The construction of a “public problem” is also an asymmetric struggle between differently positioned social actors operating according to different capacities, backgrounds, and projects to wield power to influence the public agenda. In that regard, we understand that our recognition of the urgent need for alcohol regulation in South Africa should not obfuscate our perspective, as anthropologists, of the symbolic struggles and cultural politics involved in the matter. By doing so, we hope to contribute to a more complex and encompassing approach to the issue in public policy and the academy.

Anthropologists have often been accused of belittling the severity of alcohol problems. In 1984, Robin Room led a discussion on the supposed tendency of anthropologists to minimize the seriousness of drinking problems, saying that “problem deflation” was a function of the ethnographic research process itself. Caricaturing anthropological practice, Room asserted that ethnographic methods “may underestimate the problems related to drinking because they are better attuned to measuring the pleasures than the problems of drinking” (Room *et al.*, 1984: 172). Indeed, anthropological studies of alcohol, primarily until the 1980s, focused on the role of alcohol in creating and maintaining social cohesion, challenging the orthodox perspective that saw alcohol consumption primarily as an individual pathology (Dietler, 2006). Since then, new theoretical approaches in the social sciences have led to other developments. If drinking liquor contributes to a sense of community and identity, it also reinforces difference, conflict, authority, and control. We understand that the debate on alcohol consumption is not properly examined if the issue is limited to an opposition between “pleasure and pain” (Bryceson, 2002). Fully recognizing the consequences of alcohol consumption includes observing its use in macro/micropolitics and in the manipulation of power.

In times of crisis, societies tend to reveal structural conflicts that are at times diffuse and even underestimated in ordinary life. As we will show, public officials, activists, and researchers perceived the COVID-19 pandemic and the alcohol ban as opportunities to promote a broad discussion on alcohol consumption in South Africa, using available channels to try to influence what they projected as the “new normal”, a category widely used at the time to refer to the effects of the pandemic in rearranging established social relations and power structures. In this article, however, we will show how two essential elements in this process may dim this bright future: the multifaceted nature of alcohol consumption by the “community”, which is a proxy category used by some of our interlocutors to refer to the “problematic” habits of people living in townships and rundown areas of South African cities; and the violence of selective enforcement of the alcohol ban regulation, a phenomenon that highlighted the brutal nature of the outstanding levels of social inequalities in the country,<sup>8</sup> revolving around painful memories and reenacting old ideologies of past segregationist eras.

The article is also an experiment in pandemic research conducted by three Brazilian researchers with significant experience doing fieldwork in popular South African milieus. Due to restrictions on mobility imposed throughout 2020, part of the field material presented here was collected while the three authors were restrained to their homes, surveying information remotely from news reports but also through friends and research interlocutors in South Africa about their experiences, not just of the alcohol ban,

7 As sharply stated by Gusfield (1981), “[h]uman problems do not spring up, full-blown and announced, into the consciousness of bystanders. Even to recognize a situation as painful requires a system for categorizing and defining events. All situations that are experienced by people as painful do not become matters of public activity and targets for public action”. (Gusfield, 1981: 3)

8 South Africa, the largest country in the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), is the most unequal country in the world, ranking first among 164 countries according to the World Bank’s Inequality in Southern Africa: An Assessment of the Southern African Customs Union, released in 2022, and that examines the process of household income generation to identify the sources of inequality in the region. The report found that the member countries of SACU, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia, and South Africa, compose the world’s most unequal region.

but of the enforcement of the State of Disaster as a whole. This desk-work material is presented primarily in the sections *Alcohol ban, police violence, and the building of a sanitary order* and *The discursive construction of a public problem and the project of a “new normal”*. In the final section, called *A portrait of alcohol consumption in South African popular milieus*, we present an ethnographic account of varied social experiences involving alcohol consumption in popular settings, focusing on local categories with which Black commoners deal with the pleasures and plights of drinking.

Inspired by the methodological approaches of George Marcus and his “multi-sited ethnography” (1995) and Jacques Revel’s (2010) historical analysis, we pursued the issue of the alcohol ban during the COVID-19 pandemic by using a range of observation sites and data sources, articulating micro/macro scales of memory and history. We initiate our discussion with a historical review of state regulations of alcohol consumption in South Africa in the section *A brief history of a controversy: the 2020 alcohol ban*. We show how liquor intoxication is an inherently ambiguous practice. It may lead not only to addiction and interpersonal violence but also to a “heightened form of social experience” (Karp, 1987). It is a common leisure practice, and it is important to recognize that addiction, violence, and leisure may carry a variety of meanings in an unequal society. The article, therefore, explores the multifaceted process of construing the consumption of alcoholic drinks as a “public problem”, in an effort to provide a contemporary glimpse into long-term structures of inequalities in the country.

### **A brief history of a controversy: the 2020 alcohol ban**

On 15 March 2020, in a much-anticipated statement, President Cyril Ramaphosa addressed South African citizens to announce the country’s measures to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup> Ramaphosa proclaimed the need for an extraordinary response, with mechanisms to prevent and reduce the coronavirus outbreak and measures to mitigate its economic impacts. He declared a State of Disaster, which made it possible to limit certain rights within the country. This included imposing a travel ban, closing schools, and prohibiting gatherings of more than 100 people. Furthermore, Ramaphosa called on everyone to wash their hands frequently, cover their nose and mouth and avoid close contact with other people. In his own words, he was calling for “a change of behavior amongst all South Africans”.

The President’s address to the nation on 23 March 2020,<sup>10</sup> dramatically escalated the response to the pandemic. The beginning of a nationwide lockdown was announced. Individuals would not be allowed to leave their homes except to seek medical care, buy food or medicine, and collect social grants. All shops and businesses would be closed except those providing essential services. More specifically, the Disaster Management Act (2020) stated that liquor sales, dispensing, and distribution were prohibited.<sup>11</sup> The same applied to tobacco products.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the President announced that he had directed the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) to support the South African Police Service (SAPS) to patrol the streets and enforce lockdown regulations.

Panic buying ensued among the population. For three days before the beginning of the announced lockdown, those who had financial means ran to shops, stockpiling toilet paper, hand sanitizers, cigarettes and alcoholic drinks. Soon after, South Africans realized that shops could maintain adequate stocks of essential goods, reducing anxiety. But alcoholic beverages could not be purchased for the following two months.

9 The complete statement can be found at: <https://www.gov.za/speeches/statement-president-cyril-ramaphosa-measures-combat-covid-19-epidemic-15-mar-2020-0000>.

10 <https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-escalation-measures-combat-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-23-mar>.

11 [https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis\\_document/202004/43258rg11098gon48os.pdf](https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202004/43258rg11098gon48os.pdf).

12 The prohibition of cigarette sales during the pandemic is another important topic, but, in this article, we will prioritize the alcohol issue.

The national government created a “schedule of services”, indicating permitted activities in each sector, based on five alert levels, level 5 being the strictest. Off-premises consumption of alcohol would be enabled again at Level 3, with sales allowed during limited hours.

Accordingly, on 25 May 2020, alcohol sales returned. South African drinkers celebrated. Fireworks could be heard in certain areas of Cape Town, and consumers waited in long queues at liquor stores. However, on 12 July 2020, Ramaphosa addressed the nation and surprised South Africans, stating that the sale, dispensing and distribution of alcohol would be suspended again “with immediate effect”. According to the president and the cabinet of ministers, there were two reasons for the prohibition. News from different countries showed a major increase in gender-based violence when the population was ordered to stay home. Reducing alcohol consumption, therefore, was a way to fight systemic violence suffered by South African women. Moreover, road accidents and other “booze-related” traumas were said to burden clinics and hospitals. The ban was intended to limit pressure on the healthcare system, conserving hospital facilities for COVID-19 patients. The national government faced a substantial reaction from different sectors – particularly from the wine industry, which is highly important to the country’s economy. Under pressure, the second alcohol ban was lifted on 15 August 2020.

Liquor prohibition during the pandemic was not an isolated event in South African history. A comprehensive chronology of the 2020 alcohol ban should begin much earlier. The production and drinking of various fermented alcoholic beverages pre-dates colonialism in Southern Africa, and are important aspects of the modes of life and cosmologies of Indigenous populations. European rule, however, opened the region to industrialized liquor, stimulating alcohol abuse and using it as a strategy to recruit and control labor (Ambler, 2003: 11).

The practice of paying non-White farm workers with cheap wine instead of wages (or in addition to a small monetary payment) – known as the Dop or Tot System – was used in the Cape Colony farms since the seventeenth century. Despite becoming illegal in 1961, the practice persisted until the end of the twentieth century (London, 1999). The Dop System was first used to induce Indigenous peoples to work for White settlers. It soon became institutionalized as a mechanism to reduce labor costs, maintain the workforce at farms, and provide a market for low-grade alcohol products. The Dop System was “an insidious means of attempting to dominate and control a rural underclass” (Scully, 1992: 57). It was indeed a doping system that led to increased alcohol consumption and drunkenness in the Cape (and elsewhere in South Africa). Until today, fetal alcohol syndrome is extremely prevalent in the region. During the nineteenth century, the drinking practices of non-White populations raised concerns among African leaders. Further, European moral reformers related to the Temperance Movement campaigned against the Dop System, stimulating policies to restrict non-White people’s access to alcoholic beverages. As contradictory as it may seem, both the Dop System and the following alcohol legislation were developed to subordinate and control non-Whites in South Africa.

The instrumentalization of liquor in labor and racial relations in the country kept pace with parliamentary measures to control drinking practices of the Black and Coloured populations. The legal landmark of restrictive legislation was the Liquor Act of 1891, whereby repeated public drunkenness, a source of iterative complaints in the Cape, could be punished with prison sentences. An 1898 Amendment to the Liquor Act introduced the first conditions on liquor sales to the so-called “Natives”, as well as restrictions on the production of “African beer” in rural areas.<sup>13</sup> The 1927 Liquor Act prohibited “Africans” from buying “European Liquor” or industrialized beverages, which thus became a perquisite of the country’s White population. The Act, moreover, turned the production and sale of sorghum beer, a traditional pre-colonial drink and staple food (La Hausse,

<sup>13</sup> The “traditional beer” in South Africa, known as *Mqombothi*, is a soured fermented drink produced from malted sorghum. It is opaque and brownish because of the large number of solid particles suspended in the solution (Rogerson, 2019: 254). Its alcohol content is considerably low (usually less than 3%).

1988: 7), into a monopoly of municipal authorities across the country. In the 1930s, Hellmann registered two consequences of the 1927 Liquor Act: the flourishing of an illicit beer trade and a sense of injury among poor Black Africans (Hellmann, 1934: 39, 53). Indeed, frequent police raids on townships and the arrest of women and men involved with the illegal liquor market were deeply resented in popular settings. Yet official restrictions on the consumption of industrialized alcohol by the non-White population in the country were lifted only in 1962.<sup>14 15</sup>

Excessive drinking by White working-class men and women was also a concern during apartheid, particularly from 1948 to 1960. It was seen by the elite as a threat to fundamental arrangements of the racial order, disrupting the fiction of White respectability (Roos, 2015). It is worth noting that the state found specific ways to respond to White drinking. Although alcoholism was a problem that crossed racial borders, the logic of segregation led to racially different interventions by the state, based on policies that also had a class bias. Working-class Whites who drank to excess were subjected to a disciplinary and reformist approach, taken to work colonies aimed at re-socialization and rehabilitation (Roos, 2015: 1179-1181).

Another important aspect of this controversy is that the lifting of the restrictions in 1962 was motivated by economic concerns. As Mager (1999: 387) stated, “the apartheid regime’s revision of the liquor laws was initially motivated by the economic imperatives of the malt beer brewers, winemakers and distillers”. As we have mentioned, during the 2020 alcohol ban, these powerful economic actors raised their voices once more against the official prohibition on the sales and consumption of alcoholic beverages. Despite an initial truce during the lockdown’s early stages in the country,<sup>16</sup> by August 2020, the Southern African Agri Initiative (SAAI), together with wine farms and associations, went to court over the issue. They said that the initial ban on sales had resulted in losses of more than 3 billion rands (over 180 million US dollars) and that the new ban, “arbitrary and irrational”, would threaten the existence of many wine farms.<sup>17</sup> They claimed that the regulation was unconstitutional and regarded it as part of a long-term agenda against alcohol usage.<sup>18</sup> Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) and the head of the National Coronavirus Command Council, replied that “there is no desire on the part of government to leave this prohibition in place for longer than it is regarded necessary”.<sup>19</sup> But about four months earlier, Police Minister Bheki Cele, who associated alcohol to South Africa’s high crime rate, had firmly stated: “I wish alcohol ban could be extended beyond lockdown”.<sup>20</sup>

By going to court, the SAAI sought to obtain permission to sell and consume wine in restaurants and farms. The argument was clearly stated. According to the organization, “reports show that wine consumers fall within the ‘safe’ category of alcohol consumers and that there is no evidence of wine consumers contributing to the overburdening of the country’s health system”.<sup>21</sup> They also stated that restaurants are “a regulated,

14 Anne Mager termed as “liquor freedom” the opening of the market of “European liquor” to Black South Africans and highlighted its consequences: “Africans were effectively drinking themselves deeper into apartheid and urban squalor” (Mager, 1999: 388). The new dispensation met resistance among some sectors of the Black population, whilst others felt the shift was the end of a longstanding offence, which still haunts the memories of Black commoners in the country (Lage da Cruz, 2017). During the SOWETO Uprising in 1976, bottle stores and beer halls were attacked. The protesters associated both institutions to the state’s control apparatus and deemed that alcohol abuse entailed the political quiescence of adults (Nieftagodien, 2014).

15 The history of alcohol consumption and legislation in South Africa shares similarities with other African contexts. Akyeampong (1996) shows how the history of *akpeteshie*, a Ghanaian local gin, is intertwined with colonial rule, economic interests, class conflict, nationalist politics, and the emergence of a popular culture. The edited volume *Beer in Africa: Drinking spaces, states and selves* (Van Wolputte and Fumanti, 2010) covers cases from Namibia, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, South Africa, and Burkina Faso.

16 <http://www.capetalk.co.za/articles/38115/update-liquor-forum-puts-threatened-court-case-over-alcohol-ban-on-ice>.

17 <https://ewn.co.za/2020/07/21/saai-heading-to-court-over-govt-s-lockdown-alcohol-sales-ban>.

18 <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-08-06-no-need-for-total-alcohol-ban-farming-organisation-to-argue-in-court/>.

19 <https://businesstech.co.za/news/business/421048/government-to-review-south-africas-alcohol-ban-on-a-regular-basis-report/>.

20 <https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/bheki-cele-i-wish-alcohol-ban-could-be-extended-beyond-lockdown-20200405>.

21 <https://www.iol.co.za/pretoria-news/news/nkosazana-dlamini-zuma-defends-alcohol-ban-f99f1f3e-b123-4689-a741-61fce203fdcf>.

hygienic environment where physical distancing is applied”.<sup>22</sup> The organization said that Dlamini-Zuma was wrong because she “has merely assumed that all alcohol is equal”.<sup>23</sup> And they were right. As we are trying to show, the history of alcohol consumption in South Africa is marked by extreme inequality. Patterns of alcohol consumption have been distinctively related to race and class. *Safety, regulation, and hygiene* are just a few categories in a comprehensive classificatory system that still separates and attributes different values for alcohol consumers.<sup>24</sup>

Taking the pandemic as a dramatic contrast, the following sections will highlight the dangers of ranking alcohol consumers and of selective enforcement in the institution of a public problem. We intend to explore issues of representation and citizenship that can turn a legitimate demand for state regulation into a sad tale of corruption, violence, and privilege.

### **The alcohol ban, police violence, and the building of a sanitary order**

“I’m the media! I’m the media!”, desperately shouted the reporter Azarrah Karrim, after a group of South African Police Service (SAPS) agents enforcing the level 5 COVID-19 lockdown aimed their riot guns, frantically spitting rubber bullets in her direction. In the video,<sup>25</sup> the reporter from News24, a major Internet news channel in South Africa, is filming a group of four to five officers supported by a riot-control vehicle in an empty corner of Yeoville, a predominantly Black neighborhood in Johannesburg’s inner-city area. The officers appear to be adopting crowd control conduct; the video, however, shows that the streets are empty. People were shouting from their balconies at the police when, suddenly, the cops glimpsed the reporter. Probably taking her for a resident, they immediately began to chase Azarrah in the street. Realizing their “mistake”, she ran yelling in the opposite direction, “I’m the media! I’m the media!”. We can only hear what happened next; her cell phone only captures their voices. She repeats, “I’m the media!”. The police officers then ask for her identification and reply, sounding irritated, “why didn’t you tell us this!?”.

Collin Khosa, a resident of Alexandra, a township in Johannesburg’s metropolitan area, was not so fortunate, and died after being beaten by members of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), helped by Johannesburg Metro Police Department (JMPD) agents. According to witnesses’ statements to the press, the 40-year-old Black man and members of his family were gathered in their shared yard in the township when two female SANDF soldiers approached and accused them of breaking the lockdown regulation. Khosa and his family were allegedly disrespectful when arguing that they were at home, and therefore not breaking any regulation.<sup>26</sup> Then, after asking for JMPD reinforcements, the soldiers broke into the property and attacked Collin, who, according to the accounts, was seated with a half-full glass of liquor by his side. One of his relatives described the assault to the *Sunday Times* as follows.

<sup>22</sup> <https://ewn.co.za/2020/07/21/saai-heading-to-court-over-govt-s-lockdown-alcohol-sales-ban>.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/all-alcohol-equal-wine-court-case-on-ice-after-unbanning-of-liquor-sales-20200818>.

<sup>24</sup> Bourdieu’s “science of taste and cultural consumption” may be very inspiring for a study of South African society. Bourdieu (2010) shows how the social production of taste works to legitimate social differences. Although he specifically deals with distinctions between social classes, we believe the idea can be extrapolated to discuss racial relations in South Africa. Preferences in drinks – as well as in food, music, sports, and clothes – are ordinarily used to talk about “racial differences”.

<sup>25</sup> See: “Police open fire on residents in Yeoville”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGex7ckhMPk>.

<sup>26</sup> The Ministry of Defence concluded that the JMPD and SANDF agents involved could not be held responsible since the altercation that led to Collin Khosa’s death was due to “a lack of respect towards female soldiers and provocation”. Therefore, the agents’ choices in terms of use of force were deemed justifiable. See: “Lockdown brutality: victims speak out as law enforcement conduct come under scrutiny”, <https://bit.ly/3stA8DS>.

In particular, they poured beer on top of his head and on his body; one member of the SANDF held his hand behind his back, while the other choked him; slammed him against the cement wall; hit him with the butt of the machine gun; kicked, slapped him, punched him on his face and on his stomach and ribs, and slammed him against the steel gate.<sup>27</sup>

The limited police-oversight capacity of bodies like the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID)<sup>28</sup> did not allow a more comprehensive account of the extent and characteristics of the phenomenon during the pandemic. However, media coverage of the case was extensive, exposing the problem in all its bloody details. As in the case of Colin Khosa, these accounts were consistent in thematizing the habits of popular classes and their places of living. Walter Manyani, another victim of police brutality, was shot in his right leg while going to an outside toilet in a yard that he shared with ten other families in Alexandra. Another township resident, Petrus Miggels, a Coloured 55-year-old Ravensmead man, died shortly after being assaulted by police when buying quarts of beer from a local *shebeen*.<sup>29</sup> Like other police-oversight bodies, the existence of the IPID does not guarantee that adequate policies and accountability mechanisms are in place to prevent police brutality in South Africa, a phenomenon still strongly informed by old apartheid racial and spatial hierarchies.<sup>30</sup>

Drinkers from all walks of life infringed on the prohibition to trade and publicly consume liquor during the draconian phases of the country's lockdown, despite military roadblocks and an increase in police patrolling,<sup>31</sup> whether in poor, non-White areas or the affluent, mainly White suburbs. However, while scuffles between commoners and agents in the urbanized areas and interprovincial freeways predominantly involved bribery requests, in the townships, physical violations – at times with deadly consequences – were more recurrently reported in the media. Indeed, as many research interlocutors suggested, even the police illegally acquired beer in the areas that they patrolled. The South African media reported the arrest of cops for buying,<sup>32</sup> selling<sup>33</sup> and drinking<sup>34</sup> liquor, particularly in townships.

Reports of local White residents in Johannesburg, inhabitants of affluent suburban areas, present a more permissive attitude of police authorities towards the lockdown regulations. “We were able to buy alcohol the whole time; they were serving cheap wine and bad spirits, and we had to pretend to be drinking something else, but we never had issues accessing alcohol in Joburg”, reported a local interlocutor. For those able to afford it, the lockdown violations turned out to be just a matter of mild financial inconvenience, a world of bribes and expensive bad liquor. In the days following the beginning of the alcohol ban, a case (12 units) of a popular beer like Black Label soared from 150 to 350 rands (approximately from \$10 to \$23 US dollars).

27 See: “Beer poured over his head, choked, kicked, hit with machine gun: how Collin Khosa died in Alex”, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-04-15-beer-poured-over-his-head-choked-kicked-hit-with-machine-gun-how-collin-khosa-died-in-alex/>.

28 Appointed by the Minister of Police, the IPID executive director position remained vacant from March/2019 to August/2020 due to the resignation of its previous occupant Robert McBride. The annual IPID Report for 2020-2021 didn't provide any specific analysis of the cases of police brutality during the pandemic, showing a slight increase of 11% in assault by police officers' cases, a reduction of 8% in the total number of deaths in police custody and of 11% in deaths as a result of police action. A Study from the Institute of Security Studies (ISS), however, shows that during the lockdown in South Africa the IPID recorded 376 cases and 10 deaths linked to lockdown enforcement. The IPID 2020-2021 Annual Report can be found at [http://www.ipid.gov.za/sites/default/files/documents/IPID%27S%20Annual%20Report%202020\\_21.pdf](http://www.ipid.gov.za/sites/default/files/documents/IPID%27S%20Annual%20Report%202020_21.pdf). The ISS report “Lockdown Lessons: violence and policing on a pandemic” can be found at <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/sar44.pdf>

29 “Shebeens” are informal liquor sales points in townships, which operate beyond government registration.

30 See the Institute of Security Studies (ISS) report on “How to reduce police brutality in South Africa”, by David Bruce (2020). More in <https://bit.ly/35WX3cS>.

31 This is no surprise since in South Africa and elsewhere “history has shown that it does not matter how often or to what extent alcohol consumption has been problematized or prohibited – people still continue to drink” (Hands 2018: 2).

32 <https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/fleeing-cops-arrested-after-allegedly-buying-alcohol-at-strand-store-amid-lockdown-46587329>.

33 <https://apnews.com/article/d61do3368771d56fod3779ob3bd38ea>.

34 <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-04-20-cops-arrested-for-drinking-alcohol-at-tavern-others-arrested-for-corruption/>.

Accordingly, interlocutors in a small town and in a squatter-camp resorted to the production and drinking of *mqombothi* (sorghum beer) and pineapple beer. These traditional, domestic-made beverages then became a profitable market, in contrast to pre-pandemic days, when the drinking of industrialized beers prevailed over the so-called “traditional beers”.

The selective character of state violence flared up old but very vivid racial tensions in South Africa, raising issues with the Black majoritarian government of the ANC.<sup>35</sup> Members of the ANC government, however, very vocally dismissed the violent consequences of the enforcement of the alcohol ban in township areas. Because of the apparent persistence of people breaking lockdown regulations in pursuit of stupor, Bheki Cele, Minister of Police, gave the following statement: “I hear them [people in townships] crying that cops and soldiers are brutal. Not listening to us is brutality”. Cele also publicly expressed his desire to see a post-COVID South Africa free of liquor sales. “I just hope that one day there will be no liquor”, he said on another occasion, immediately explaining his reasoning: “I don’t run the country, but what has happened when you look at the crime stats, for that fact that shebeens are closed, people are sleeping. They don’t move around here in shebeens and taverns being uncontrollable [sic]”.<sup>36</sup> In addition to the stigmatizing way they address the problem of substance abuse in townships, almost as a “civilizational” matter, statements like these are highly problematic because they tend to treat a health problem as a police issue.

When Collin Khosa was killed two weeks into the implementation of the lockdown, South Africa had registered only 24 deaths by COVID-19. The first victim of the pandemic in Alexandra township may have died at the hands of those who were supposed to protect them from the virus.

### **The discursive construction of a public problem and the project of a “new normal”**

Scientific knowledge – manifest especially through the language of statistics – plays an important role in the construction of a *public problem*, both as the conveyer of legitimate representations of a problem as collective, and by making it eligible to the state as a domain of life that deserves to be the object of political strategy (Foucault, 2007, 2019). A public problem somehow manages to resonate in the realms of public opinion, policy and politics. But public arenas are only misleadingly considered the ultimate realm of equality. As concrete political forces operating across different capitalist societies (a “thing-in-itself”), democracies are unstable processes of class struggle highly sensitive to specific economic and historical conditions (Lukács, 1991). In the practical realms of citizenship, it can be expected that some actors have greater influence in electing the most important public problems from among various pressing issues. That is why representational struggles are core to the democratic agenda today. They expose a big divide between the “public”, active authors of their position in this asymmetric game of power and values, and those who are targeted as “problems”, treated as passive recipients for governmental action (or inaction), when not as public enemies (Chatterjee, 2004).

In this section we illuminate a limited but crucial dimension of this process by discussing the development of a series of webinars in South Africa about the effects of the alcohol ban regulations. Arranged by two African-based NGOs operating regionally in Southern Africa, the webinars were broadcast live to an audience of subscribers. They included members of the South African government, health practitioners, researchers,

35 “I will never forgive the ANC government, Cyril Ramaphosa, SANDF and SAPS for abusing the people during this lockdown, kicking and killing us, while Whites were having a braai [barbecue], and not a single one of them touched, I will never!”. See “Army and police violence spurs racial tensions”, <https://bit.ly/31moVUT>.

36 See: “Not listening to us is brutality,” says Bheki Cele on lockdown”, <https://bit.ly/3eU18Qs>.



social movements, and community leaders.<sup>37</sup> The two online meetings took place in May 2020. The topic guiding the discussions was the effects of the strict lockdown regulations on crime and other social predicaments, especially the impacts of the alcohol ban during levels 5, 4 and 3. We will now describe this online fieldwork experience as a case study, focusing on the different discursive strategies used to take a position in the debate.

In addition to the episodes of police brutality, two major trends made the headlines about lockdown regulations, reinforcing the statements initially raised by the national government, as shown in the previous section. The first was the association between the liquor ban and the drop in homicides, assaults, and other violent crimes, including gender-based violence and femicide. The second was the effects of the ban on the decrease in alcohol-related hospital trauma admissions, associated with events like road accidents, falls and stabbings. Although drawing legitimacy from the broader beneficial impact of the ban on the country, the portrayal of “problematic drinking practices” and their negative consequences were concentrated in townships, depicting almost exclusively the lifestyle of the urban poor.

The goal of the first online meeting was to openly influence the South African government to toughen the regulations on alcohol sales, and the pandemic was seen as an opportunity to influence the public agenda in that matter. The hegemonic position within the group tended towards “prohibitionism”, although there were a few dissident voices among the panelists who advocated for a more moderate and grounded approach to the regulation. Even when openly seeking to achieve political goals, these positions were presented as rational and imperative responses to the statistics. One of the panelists, a White man who identified himself as “the voice of the rural fringe”, told terrifying first-hand stories of alcohol-related crimes and used statistics of HIV, mental disorders, and poor fetal development, among others, to strengthen his argument. “The less the people consume alcohol is better; we have to convince people that, in the long-run, they will be better without it; but the unions will resist, many of their members have substance abuse issues too”, he concluded, anticipating some resistance to his perspective.

In the second meeting, organized by a multidisciplinary network of researchers, the overall perspective was to promote “evidence-based” policies as the only way to improve the impacts of COVID-19 regulations on crime statistics in South Africa. One of the panelists, a medical scientist from Cape Town, opened his presentation by saying: “my dream for South Africa is a ‘new normal’ led by evidence”. In the same meeting, a local health agent working in the Cape Flats, a peripheral area in Cape Town, after presenting numbers on the reduction of trauma admissions in the local hospital, was also very graphic about the “savage attacks and killings” related to alcohol in the communities. “We know what happens from every day; it’s a small proportion of big drinkers that are the ‘troublemakers’, that go from shebeen to shebeen all day”, said the man, concluding right after, “those are the people involved in crime, the people that are going to the emergency room”.

Occasionally, comments insinuated some “social orthopaedic” ambitions in the audience: “we have to teach them to socialize differently, in a different environment, like the coffeeshops”, “people have to understand the statistical relationship between alcohol and crime”, “we have to bring the community with us, to a new normal without alcohol”. The participants often stated the importance of data as a prerequisite for good governance: “quality data, quality decision making in a click of a button”, “we cannot do anything without the data”, “we just see a part of the problem; we have to collect data to support a great change in society”. However, a South African National Liquor Authority member challenged the expectation in one of the meetings. “We wish that policy was made based on evidence all the time; data is important, but it’s not enough for us [the government]”, she concluded.

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<sup>37</sup> Permission to attend the meetings was requested from the organizers by e-mail, when one of the authors was explicitly presented as someone “researching the enforcement of liquor regulation during the COVID-19 pandemic” in Brazil and South Africa. The identity as a “researcher” at one of the most reputed South African universities established a legitimate identity as a representative of the scientific community and as someone familiar with the country’s reality.

The attendance at the meetings revealed yet another important continuity between the two webinars. The cultural forms used to frame the affected territories and populations depicted the life of popular classes, who provide the labor for affluent areas of South African cities, and a structure of subaltern integration that still resembles the old apartheid society. According to the participants, the “problem of alcohol in South Africa” was one of abusive consumption, deregulated markets, and high levels of illegality. Those issues, although framed as a “national problem”, were said to affect mostly townships, illegal settlements, and other peripheral areas in the country. Another way to frame the situation was the descriptions of what was being called “problematic patterns of drinking” and their harmful effects on society. “We all know the ‘patterns of drinking’ that are considered problematic; the patterns of drinking are not the same in all areas and all classes; in township areas, alcohol is part of a culture, and the lack of entertainment; people in townships have very little to do”, one participant stated.

Although they were constantly mentioned in the meetings, people from townships were poorly represented among the panelists on both occasions. In the meeting with the researchers, as mentioned above, one community health agent from the Cape Flats talked about the impacts of prohibition in a local hospital. In the meeting with social organizations, the host announced the attendance of one township youth group. In both cases, however, they emphasized the challenges to “involve” or “convince” the communities, the word used by the participants often as a synonym for “township”. As one participant affirmed in the first meeting: “they [the communities] should all participate in this idea [of an alcohol-free South Africa], but that would make us lose support within the communities; the illegal shebeens and home brewing are part of the local economy and culture, especially in the Black townships”.

Meanwhile, the circumvention of the ban in elite and White circles remained out of sight and was not raised in the debates. In other words, white-collar drinking has not been treated as an object of official concern nor as a police target. The circumstances called to mind a seminal manifesto in which Laura Nader noticed the “fact that crimes are differentially stigmatized and prosecuted according to class” (1969: 15). Nader argued that it was not only official agencies and government personnel who had neglected a thorough investigation of delinquency among the upper classes. According to her, social scientists too had long privileged the study of non-Western cultures and the popular strata in general, thus contributing to the knowledge gap on deception and crime among the powerful. Drinking patterns in elite circles have remained immune to public scrutiny, for power and wealth are, *inter alia*, the cornerstone of privacy (Barrows and Room, 1991: 7).<sup>38</sup>

Another common trend in the two meetings was a lack of critical thinking about the regulatory dimension of the suggested legislative changes. The severity of state violence during the enforcement of the alcohol ban in townships was, therefore, not seriously approached. One of the panelists, a member of the ANC, even advocated for more government support for the police. “The problem is that we need more enforcement; the enforcement of the state is very weak”, said the politician, “the police don’t have the legislative means to do their job, to make arrests; they don’t know what to do”, he concluded. There were brief mentions of police corruption in the comments. In one case, in the chat area during the second meeting, a police station within Johannesburg’s inner city was mentioned for participating in the illegal trading of alcohol. There was also an explicit problematization of how prohibition criminalizes peripheral populations, by a panelist from the University of Cape Town in the first meeting. Beyond these mentions of the role of police agencies in implementing alcohol regulations, the potential criminalization of populations was not seriously discussed. As the pandemic has shown, this can be dangerous, especially for already stigmatized areas and populations.<sup>39</sup>

38 “The well-to-do had the luxury of privacy and elaborate etiquettes surrounding drinking and dining, and their consumption remained discreetly hidden from the public record. For better and for worse, labouring people lacked such luxuries”.

39 Police excess towards White people in affluent areas portrayed in the media were rare and anecdotal, as when police agents chased an old woman who was walking her dog during level 5 of lockdown.

Although disastrous in human terms, the global COVID-19 crisis was, in many ways, an opportunity. In this case, an opportunity to project the “new normal” for a post-pandemic South Africa. The idea of “evidence-based approaches” was the unifying creed among participants in both webinar series. Discursively stripped of all subjectivity, the numbers seemed to help establish a position above all positions, safe from bias and the restraints of localisms. But what would a world “led by evidence” be like? Would it necessarily be more democratic or inclusive? Numbers make people recognizable and manageable by the state, but they are not necessarily more “objective”. They are the most tangible outcome of a complex inscription process produced by the work of devices and the very mundane procedures of the ordinary life of organizations and their members (Latour, 1987). Although not formally excluded from the idea of “evidence”, qualitative approaches to the issue during the meetings were limited and anecdotal. To be fair, we have to recognize the limitations imposed on systematic fieldwork activities during the pandemic in South Africa.

For the urban poor, usurped of the authorship of their own social existence, old colonial ideologies thematizing the “uncivilized masses”, a core instrument of colonial domination in Africa (Fanon, 2008), were reframed in episodes of police brutality during the pandemic. Hence, what deserves attention is not infringement *per se*, but the insistence of South African authorities and experts to target stigmatized townships and populations. In contrast, the illegal trade and consumption of alcohol among the middle and upper classes remained under a comfortable veil of oblivion and public silence. As Nader (1969) warned, criminality does not fall under racial and economic boundaries. Fortunately, even the privilege of privacy has limits, and drinking leaves its clues, such as the accumulation of empty bottles waiting for garbage collection in the streets of affluent suburbs. Despite the prohibition of in-premise consumption of alcohol, the authors noticed beer drinking in restaurants and domestic gatherings, as well as other social occasions. Direct acquisition of wine in producing areas was also witnessed. All free of the inconvenience of police brutality. In an Italian restaurant in Johannesburg, waiters offered red and white “juice” to customers in a quasi-biblical transmutation.

As we have shown, the broader social consequences of the issues raised above were poorly addressed during the meetings. As widely noted by the panelists and participants, however, when you listen to “the community”, responses can be much more ambiguous and challenging to the formal logic of statistics and policy. Those complexities were at times framed as a matter of ignorance (of statistical correlations, of healthy forms of amusement), at times as impediments (cultural, economic, or ideologic) to public policies, and at other times as limited perspectives impeding the implementation of “evidence-based approaches”. In the next section, we offer an ethnographic account of some of the complexities regarding alcohol sales and consumption in South African townships. By doing so, we hope to highlight the importance of further qualitative analysis of the effects of prohibition during the pandemic and carefully consider the possible negative impacts of future regulatory measures on the everyday life of peripheral areas.

## **A portrait of alcohol consumption in South African popular milieux**

The institutional framing of the liquor issue during the stricter phases of the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa did not do justice to the variety of experiences associated with the use of alcoholic beverages in the country. In this section, we present ethnographic material gathered in 2016 in a squatter camp in a metropolitan area and a small town, to offer a grounded portrait of what authorities, experts and NGO members have proposed in the previous sections. It is important to emphasize here that we are neither advocating against “evidence” nor deflating the predicaments of excessive alcohol consumption, which we and our interlocutors

do recognize. Rather, we wish to address the role of liquor as an important aspect of popular leisure strategies and the reinforcement of social bonds. The multifarious functions, pleasures and plights of drinking have long gone in tandem.<sup>40</sup>

Bra D.,<sup>41</sup> as D. Khumalo was called in the squatter camp where he lived, passed away in his early sixties. He and his friends constituted a *drinking club*, a regular gathering of men around a local preference: industrialized beers. In his last years, bra D. had stopped smoking cigarettes and *zolo* (hemp) due to extensive lung damage. Yet he never quit the habit of drinking beers and frequenting the local taverns, where his well-known exaggerated anecdotes were met with pleasure and overtones of ridicule. When drunk, the often-cheerful D. could turn somewhat quarrelsome. Yet he was not the “fighting type”. Rather than animosity, happiness figured prominently in his motto: “Me, if I’m drinking, I’m happy. I feel happy. [...] If I’m not drinking, I’m not happy. Just like that”.

Bra D. openly depicted how alcohol consumption in a squatter camp – a predominantly disheartening landscape – alleviates discomfort and contributes to an atmosphere of fellowship and joy.<sup>42</sup> Yet this interlocutor made clear a troublesome phenomenon associated with beer drinking: the formation of *liquor-slaves*. In a recorded interview, he recollected events leading to his divorce: “When I was 37 or 36, I told my first wife: can you leave me? Because you’re drinking too much... [...] The first times were all right. After two or three years, she started to drink... Too much. [...] After three years, she was a liquor slave”.

*Beer worms* is another South African term characterizing the slave-like addiction to which bra D. alluded and which arguably applied to himself. Although “drinking too much” and “liquor-slaves” are terms often applied to describe others, some drinkers do apply both categories to themselves. According to a 30-year-old interlocutor in the squatter camp: “the beer is a problem. You can drink one and sleep. Me no, I can’t sleep. If I get one, I want more and more and more. That’s why when you have the money you can’t sleep. We are slaves for drinking”.

Another liquor category often mentioned in South African popular milieux is *babalas* – pronounced *papalasi*. Borrowed from Afrikaans<sup>43</sup> and meaning “hangover”, *babalas* can be best understood among heavy drinkers as a compulsion or urge, the drive behind the continuous ingestion of alcoholic beverages. We may see it as an index that “alcohol-dependence syndrome is a psychobiological reality, not an arbitrary social label” (Room *et al.*, 1984: 175). Interlocutors in the squatter camp experienced *babalas* as an irresistible impulse towards drinking additional doses of alcohol. According to the above-quoted man,

when you get drunk there’s a problem. If I wake up in the morning, I need one or two beers, to keep *babalas* out. If you buy me a cold drink, my *babalas* is not fine. If I drink the beer, the *babalas* goes out. Yesterday [Sunday] and today [Monday] in the morning, I was busy drinking. In the morning I needed a beer. Then my body was fine, I’ve got the energy. It’s the liquor.

The notions of *babalas* and *liquor-slaves* indicate that the “drinking culture” (La Hausse, 1984) in popular South African settings may well amount to a form of captivity and that drinkers are aware of the problem. Neither captivity nor compulsion, however, fully portray an intricate social fact related to alcohol consumption. Beer drinking in an area deprived of leisure options is almost the sole source of daily relief and contentment, according to M., another interlocutor, and a skilled worker in a factory.

40 Krige (1932), Hellman (1934), La Hausse (1984, 1988, 1992), Crush and Ambler (1992), and Ambler (2003) present compelling historical and ethnographic records on the complexities of alcohol consumption in South Africa over 200 years.

41 *Bra* is a local contraction of “brother”, used as a deference to older men, but not the eldest, who are designated as *babas*.

42 The beer-induced alleviation of an oppressive existence is recognized by La Hausse (1984: 93).

43 Afrikaans language, also called Cape Dutch, is one of the eleven official languages of South Africa, and was the former official language of the *apartheid* regime.

Here there's no entertainment to entertain the minds. You can't go to the library bring the book to home, play the computer... There's nothing to entertain your mind. You sleep, you work, and then have a beer and stay together. We just can't go on and on. There's no complex, cinema, all things to entertain the minds. No ground to play football. There's nothing.

A frank ethnography of leisure in this popular milieu is the foundation for our affirmation that the moments when many South Africans find respite and contentment take place around liquor – especially beers. There is nothing new about this. Though in a colonial language, a pioneer of ethnographies in 1930 Johannesburg's popular settings reported that “beer-drinking, because of the social amenities attendant upon it, is as favoured a recreation of the urban Native as of the tribal Native” (Hellmann, 1934: 39). To restate this in twenty-first century South Africa is neither to essentialize the “African population”<sup>44</sup> nor to restrict leisure to drinking. As a couple composed of a teetotaler woman and a very moderate beer drinker residing in the squatter camp once said, “to enjoy life is not to drink. People going to churches are enjoying their lives”. Moreover, church attendance, beer-drinking and the consumption of other inebriating substances are not necessarily incompatible forms of enjoyment, as portrayed by another interlocutor.

A. is a 55-year-old “church-goer”, domestic worker, and the main caretaker of two grandchildren. A respectable grandmother, during the week A. liked to sit after work to smoke *zolo* and chat with her dearest neighbors. On weekends, A.'s daily pleasure with hemp used to be combined with beer drinking. Her house was the gathering point of neighbours and, from Friday to Sunday, women and men, younger and older, would come in a continuous flow throughout the day. By weekend nights, the sound of nearby taverns enlivened her yard, where beers, *zolo* and cigarettes were shared hand to hand, mouth to mouth. She used to drink moderately in permanent charge of her grandchildren and was involved in occasional weekend church activities, but sometimes A. and her closest friends shared the pleasures of inebriation. A similar joyful dynamic took place at A.'s mother's house in a small town, where even the 75-year-old matriarch used to join in family beer-drinking, moderately, and away from the public scene.

In addition to alcohol consumption in domestic, and family settings, fieldwork experience also allowed us to observe the dynamics of *shebeen* attendance. During the week, *shebeens* were frequented mainly by men, most of them workers stopping to drink and chat. Such places were also the gathering point of youth, some smoking *zolo*, some drinking, and some just chatting or watching TV. During the weekends, different dynamics were set in motion, with a continuous flow of people coming to sit, drink, smoke, talk, and debate.<sup>45</sup> Roughly, male attendance prevailed, especially among the older patrons. Yet the profile of customers had no clear-cut gender or age-strata patterns. To the contrary, some *shebeens* became discos at night, where both young men and women came to drink, gamble, and dance until dawn.

La Hausse (1988; 1992) and Hellmann (1934) have already alluded to this phenomenon in the past: “beer was brewed, food was prepared and at six p.m. on Saturday the dance commenced to continue for a full twelve hours” (Hellmann, 1934: 52). The current Minister of Transport also mentioned this practice: “people are out of control in terms of alcohol. [...]. It's a mess. This over-access of alcohol, we drink from six to six — it's over — it must come to an end”.<sup>46</sup> Interlocutors in the squatter-camp were well aware of the dangers associated with night-long drinking in *shebeens* or taverns. According to one of them: “six-to-six is not right. For example, you drink every day with G. If you meet him in the morning, you'll force him to share the beer with you. If he doesn't want, you fight”. Accordingly, this interlocutor said he only engaged in six-to-six drinking at home.

44 By presenting this excerpt from Hellmann (1934), we are not condoning expressions such as “the Native”, whose racist assumptions are not only false but also immoral. We believe, however, that the excerpt can be taken as an ethnographic and historical index of the centrality of beer drinking to popular leisure strategies.

45 A local category designating conversations with clear signs of dissent among its participants.

46 <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/gauteng/curtail-the-sale-of-booze-says-mbalula-after-alleged-drunk-driver-crash-tragedy-98f88624-5b-23-4153-affa-5e4830e4229a>.

Among younger interlocutors, a taste for night-long drinking at taverns seemed to prevail. V., a 20-year-old mother of two, said: “I can go Friday, Saturday, Sunday without sleeping. I enjoy drinking at the tavern”. Yet she also recognized the fights in these places as a problem: “they are shooting each other, they are beating each other with bottles, but it doesn’t happen every day”. Another interlocutor, a 35-year-old woman who also attended *shebeens*, called attention to dangers other than brawls: “they may drug you; they say they buy a lot of beers [for you] and you must have sex with them”. Wojcicki (2002) has also recorded this phenomenon. Pitpitan *et al.* (2013) and Bonner *et al.* (2019) have essential data on the correlation between drinking in taverns or *shebeens*, gender-based violence and exposure to HIV.

As we mentioned, our purpose is not to deny the nefarious effects of alcohol, particularly of alcohol intoxication or binge drinking (WHO, 2018). Statistics on trauma admissions in hospitals, crime rates and gender-based violence tell only part of the story, and “drinking culture” (La Hausse, 1984) remains paradoxical. Even the superlative case of *six-to-six* (night-long drinking) involves not only a fall into a world of slave-like compulsion and gender brutality but also an ascension into a highly sociable and affective atmosphere. An interlocutor called attention to the effects of night-long drinking on the reproduction of cooperative, team-like social bonds:

In township, there’s something connecting people. You can make *islala* [six-to-six] together. We are just a team like this.

Alcohol-lubricated sociability does create an atmosphere of togetherness, and night-long drinking also gives rise to an effervescence that shall not be taken as mere evanescent excitement, because the reproduction of “long-lasting social relations” are at stake (Karp, 1987). Like the beer parties analyzed by Karp among the Kenyan Iteso, night-long drinking in South Africa also brings about a “heightened form of social experience” (1987: 93).<sup>47</sup> Rather than a direct comparison between two different African contexts, what is at stake is alcohol’s “tension-reducing properties” and “unifying effects in rituals of solidarity” (Douglas, 2002). A South African interlocutor once referred to such heights of social existence in transcendental terms. It was a particularly vivid Friday night and, in A.’s living room, she and her former companion, with some kin and neighbors, were all drinking, dancing, clapping, and singing together. In the improvised choir, the refrain declared: “no problem, God is here”. At some point during the celebration, the host’s best friend enthusiastically said: “you see God, he’s happy like us”. The association between alcohol intoxication and transcendent-like experiences arises in alcohol studies and, as such, cannot be considered as a South African particularity (Blocker *et al.*, 2003; Singaïny, 2015).

That rapture may coexist with the brutality of township brawls and gender-based violence indicates that paradox is an outstanding feature of the “drinking culture” (La Hausse, 1984). Whether one appreciates it or not, to turn a blind eye to such complexities is not only a theoretical and ethnographic mistake but creates the mirage that simplistic, unilateral solutions could tackle an intricate issue. As we said before, it is not a matter of choosing between pleasure or pain but rather trying to grasp the somewhat erratic, certainly ambivalent constitution of socialized alcohol consumption. Reducing such a multivalent social fact to a statistical, disembodied matter only thickens the veil covering the social meanings of drinking practices in South Africa. This may well serve the biopolitical administration of citizens, but not a deeper understanding and a frank debate on the matter.

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<sup>47</sup> Mager (2010: 5) also utilizes Karp’s observations on the communal dimension of beer drinking to understand the South African drinking culture.

## Conclusion

In 1934, only seven years after the passing of the Liquor Act, which had prohibited Blacks both from making traditional grain-beer and from drinking “European liquor”, ethnography led Hellmann to notice: “despite the heavy penalties which are incurred by an infringement of the law, beer-brewing flourished in Johannesburg” (1934: 39). Twenty-six years after her pioneer observations, the South African Institute of Race Relations stated: “it is abundantly clear that, particularly in urban areas, the liquor restrictions have proved ineffective” (Horrell, 1960: 14). As La Hausse (1984) once stated, despite decades of official repression, the “drinking culture” in South Africa proved “resilient”. As it has proved itself to be once again. Not even the stringent measures set in motion to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic brought the alcohol trade to a halt. Between March and August 2020, many Blacks, Coloureds and Whites continued to purchase and drink liquor illegally. Yet not all such practices were treated as crimes and public problems deserving expert data, official responses, and police actions, thus narrowing down a vast and colorful universe of law-infringement to historically stigmatized areas, townships and urban peripheries inhabited by poor non-White South Africans.

Inspired by the analysis of Partha Chatterjee (2004), we can say that the townships in South Africa – as opposed to affluent, and predominantly White suburbs – have been represented as mere “target populations”, discernible in this case by their distinctive marks and performances regarding alcohol consumption, and not fully entitled as citizens. By adopting the language of “government”, evidence-based advocacy should not neglect important aspects of the life of the “governed” (Chatterjee, 2004). As anthropologists, our contribution is to support policymakers with qualitative insights on the matter and reveal a complexity to which many have turned a blind eye.

There is another issue that must be challenged. As a panelist mentioned in one of the online meetings, “evidence” is not the main force driving governmental action. In a way, the work of “evidence” becomes political, helping to unveil forms of structural violence. Policies on drinking during the South African lockdown reinforced a longstanding institutional bias that associates so-called “problematic drinking patterns” with the country’s popular strata, as though illegal alcohol consumption and abuse fell within racial and class lines. That it does not fall within these lines is an ethnographic finding we presented in this article to offset our anthropological bent to investigate the destitute (Nader, 1969). Moreover, not even when popular patterns of alcohol abuse in South Africa were under discussion, was the immediately affected population properly consulted. The ethnography of webinars that discussed alcohol regulation showed a poor representation of township dwellers, despite their centrality in the characterization of “problematic drinking patterns”. The evidence-based approach of the webinars left mostly untouched the intricate field of social experiences and subjectivities, without which neither alcohol consumption nor the violence related to it can be dealt with adequately.

Against this background, we portrayed different circumstances and meanings attributed to drinking practices in popular settings and recognized that they remain involved in contradiction, a crucial category in liquor studies in South Africa (La Hausse 1988; Crush and Ambler, 1992). We presented local notions such as *liquor-slaves* and *babalas* as an indication that commoners are well aware of the plights of alcohol abuse and thus cannot be treated as infant-like, immature subjects (Mager, 1999: 370) who must be enlightened by the word of experts and authorities, a leitmotiv in the history of liquor restriction in South Africa. Our point is that despite awareness of the predicaments derived from alcohol abuse, social alcohol consumption remains a central feature of modes of living, a pleasure that defies official prohibitions and soldiers’ boots on the ground. History, we insist, has shown this challenge to be a social phenomenon among the well-to-do and the poor. As stated by Hands (2018), “it does not matter how often or to what extent alcohol consumption has been problematized or prohibited – people still continue to drink” (Hands, 2018: 2).

Why do people continue to drink? Rather than answering the question, our effort has been to recognize and follow a controversy, which in South Africa has historically taken the form of “complicated struggles [...] over the very meaning of alcohol itself” (Crush and Ambler, 1992: 1). Regarding the conceptualization of alcohol as a “public problem”, we showed how controversies revolve around various actors, who are differentially positioned and vested with asymmetrical powers and capacities to define and raise social facts as themes of collective concern. In a somewhat contra-hegemonical bid, we strived to offset one-sided meanings attached by authorities and experts to alcohol consumption. Such discussion, we hope, is not a case for political inaction; to the contrary, it is a reason for optimism, for awareness is a precondition for hope (Biko, 2004: 114).

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# Intimate Relations: multispecie stories of manioc social life

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## Abstract

Manioc (*Manihot esculenta* Crantz) is a way of life that gives us the opportunity to rethink agricultural production and thus provides a divergent understanding of the human domestication of plants. In the traditional literature about manioc, its evolution has been recognized as a process of domestication, the control of a biological species by humans or through “the paradigm of human exceptionalism.” In this paper we seek possible ways to tell another story about manioc and its human and non-human companions: a partial and modest testimony among many possibilities found between the biological and anthropological worlds. We argue that the domestication model is only a particular Western mode of telling the story and forming relations with manioc. To contrast this we see the possibility of opening our minds to another story, to describe the human-manioc relation as an intimate relationship in which all elements are agents, and simultaneously objects of action. Manioc are bodies-in-movement, growing and developing in the formation of multi-species landscapes. We understand this intimate relationship, as Donna Haraway explains, as a sympoietic story, a process of “becoming-with” that occurs in the flow of life.

**Keywords:** manioc, symbiosis, domestication, human exceptionalism, indigenous peoples.

# Relações íntimas: histórias multiespécie da vida social da mandioca

## Resumo

A mandioca (*Manihot esculenta* Crantz) é um modo de vida que nos dá a oportunidade de repensar a produção agrícola e, assim, proporciona uma compreensão divergente da domesticação humana das plantas. Na literatura sobre a mandioca, sua evolução tem sido reconhecida como um processo de domesticação, o controle de uma espécie biológica pelo homem ou “o paradigma da excepcionalidade humana”. Neste artigo, buscamos formas possíveis de contar uma outra história sobre a mandioca e seus companheiros humanos e não humanos: um testemunho parcial e modesto entre tantas possibilidades entre os mundos biológico e antropológico. Argumentamos que o modelo de domesticação é apenas um modo particular de contar a história e estabelecer relações com a mandioca. Para contrastar, vemos a possibilidade de abrir nossas mentes para proliferar outra história, para descrever a relação humanos-mandioca como uma relação íntima, um enredamento em que todos os viventes são agentes e, ao mesmo tempo, objetos de ação. A mandioca é um corpo em movimento, crescendo e se desenvolvendo na formação de paisagens multiespécies. Entendemos essa relação íntima, como explica Donna Haraway, como uma história simpoiética, um processo de “tornar-se-com” que ocorre no fluir da vida.

**Palavras-chave:** mandioca, simbiose, domesticação, excepcionalismo humano, povos indígenas.

# Intimate Relations: multispecie stories of manioc social life

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## Introduction

For the biological, agronomic, and anthropological sciences, manioc (or cassava, *mandioca*, *aipim*, or *macaxeira* in Portuguese, and *yuca* in Spanish-speaking countries)<sup>1</sup> is described as a domesticated species that emerged from selective cultivation processes from its wild ancestors. The manioc is considered to belong to a biological population created through an evolutionary history of human selection with hundreds of different cultivars or varieties distributed throughout the Americas. Manioc emerged over millennia in close association with South American Indigenous peoples and is currently cultivated in Indigenous and peasant agricultural systems around the globe (Piperno, 2011; De Bruijn and Fresco, 1989; Rogers, 1965; Cock, 1985). Transported from South America to plantations in Africa and Asia and then to Europe and the US, manioc has recently become a commodity (FAO/IFAD 2000), as we will see below. This is the neo-evolutionary story that has emerged in scientific studies from colonial times until recent developments - a story of plants domesticated by humans.

In this paper, we seek possible ways of telling an alternative story about manioc social life and its human and non-human companions, and thus offer a partial and modest testimony about multispecie relationships and the various compositions of manioc on different landscapes. We affirm that domestication models are only a particular Western mode of telling the story and constructing relations with manioc. Faced with the dominant realist or constructivist Western narrative of one nature versus multiple cultures in the larger domestication story, we can open our minds to the emergent natureculture perspective. Our objective here is to question our conceptions of where species exist (Kirksey, 2015; Gilbert et al., 2012) (separated from the environment) and their evolution (submitted to two distinct forces: natural and cultural selection) since we consider these issues to be central in rendering problematic the concept of domestication. The notion of species here must be rethought, not to proclaim its end, but rather to think with manioc and stories of its emergence, entangling and sympoietical differentiation<sup>2</sup>. To do so it is necessary to provincialize humans and denaturalize the idea of domestication (*domus*) which is based on the dominant enlightenment narrative of human exceptionalism.

It is also necessary to understand domestication as a set of practices that emerged during colonialism and capitalism after 1492 and determined the agricultural practices of colonial and imperial plantations, but which also took shape with the universal idea of transformative processes from the wild to the domestic, in civilizing processes coordinated by human techniques on the bodies of other species (Tsing, 2012; Cassidy, 2007; Swanson et al., 2018). In contrast to the human exceptionalist idea of domestication, we will present a story that can depict the life of manioc, its agency in human and non-human life and its intimate relationships with humans in biodiverse agricultural systems.

1 This new world plant is classified as *Manihot esculenta* Crantz and belongs to the *Manihot* genus in the Euphorbiaceae family.

2 There are dozens of ways to deal with the concept of species depending on whether we consider ecological, evolutionary, biological, phylogenetic, morphological or taxonomic aspects, with concern for the biological dimensions such as sexuality and the production of fertile offspring as one of the central issues (Mayden, 1997; Stamos, 2003).

While questioning the concept of domestication, we have sought to follow the proposal of Thom Van Dooren (2012) in an effort to conceptualize the evolution of tropical agricultural landscapes in which all parties, human and nonhuman, are involved and influenced by their interactions. Following Anna Tsing (2018), we bring a feminist awareness to the work of “domus” in multi-species narratives. This allows us to look at domestication as a concept of linear progress, human mastery and one of many ways that humans can live with other beings. Tsing encourages us to explore domestication not just as a narrative or ideology but also as a particular Western form of human shaped worlds and proposes ethnographic tools that can help distinguish between resurgent landscapes and multispecies encounters. Inspired by Amerindian ontologies, we can explore the narratives in which plants are not perceived as natural objects, but as animated lives (Oliveira et al., 2021; Descola, 2004; Empeaire et al. 2001; Carneiro da Cunha, 2017) that have relations that make them part of human *familiarisation* (Fausto and Neves, 2018). We are grateful to these authors for providing us with conceptual tools for thinking about manioc social life in all of its complexities.

Furthermore, to deal with manioc and humans, we are inspired by the concept of intimate relations or sympoiesis to notice manioc assemblages and to think of manioc as a *companion species* (Haraway, 2003; Tsing, 2012), with the visceral idea that organisms are never alone but become what they are in a meshwork of interconnected histories of multiple living and nonliving beings. Such assemblages provide openings to emergent and contingent processes, which point to stories of more-than-human socialities and assemblages rather than individuals, leading us to the guiding concept of symbiosis (Margulis and Fester, 1991). We understand this intimate relationship, as Donna Haraway explains, as a sympoietic story, a process of “becoming-with” that occurs in the flow of life. Sym-poiesis here, is a simple word, which means “making-with” (Haraway, 2017). In this way, we relate to manioc as it transforms through the power of multiple histories of multispecies entanglement, co-domestication, and co-development, in which manioc is both an agent and immersed in a meshwork of animacy. This is an invitation to look at manioc as a mode of life rather than a species; as assemblage rather than individuals; as sympoetic rather than domesticated. We hope that this effort can inspire research agendas that are neither against nor in favor of using the concept of domestication, but seek to go beyond this concept (Tsing, 2018).

In this sense, we provoke a reflection inspired by Indigenous practices and conceptions and our ethnographic experiences with multispecies ethnography to become aware of stories and relationships involved in manioc cultivation. We engage in manioc social life as we have intimate, emotional and affective ties to this plant, which is highly present not only in Brazilian lives but also in the lives of many people throughout the globe today, and because it is a part of our everyday life and academic trajectory alongside Indigenous peoples in Brazil (Cardoso, 2018; Arruda Campos, 2016). Furthermore, manioc is a plant of fundamental importance to the conformation of the socio-natural landscape of tropical regions. In addition to the utilitarian arguments that we can evoke, we recognize that manioc plants are organisms interconnected with land, forest, water, wind, animals, other plants, insects, fungi, the moon, as well as protective spirits, as established in agronomic studies of this plant and stories told by many peasants and Indigenous peoples and recorded by anthropologists and ethnobotanists.

### **Becoming a domesticated plant**

The act of telling stories always involves more than simple descriptions. Narratives are discursive and material dynamics that historicize the world, and are completely inseparable from lived experiences and are thus vital contributors to the emergence of what “exists.” As Thom Van Dooren (2014) affirms, “even a story that purports to be purely mimetic, is never just a passive mirror of reality.” Stories are part of the ecologies of life – whether of domestication or others – they participate in the formation of the world, and as a result,

telling stories has consequences, and one of them is that we are inevitably led to new connections and with them to new responsibilities and obligations.

In the Encyclopedia of Life<sup>3</sup>, manioc is described as a perennial woody shrub in the Euphorbiaceae family, native to South America, but now grown in tropical and subtropical areas around the world for the production of its edible starchy roots (tubers), propagated annually from cuttings from its stem. Its body is composed of fibrous and tuberous roots, a main stem, lateral branches, bifurcations or reproductive branches, leaves and inflorescences. It is a shrub that can reach 2.75 meters in height, with leaves deeply divided into 3 to 7 lobes, with small fruits, about 1 cm in diameter. The root tubers of cultivated varieties can be 5 to 10 cm in diameter and 15 to 30 cm in long. Fresh roots and leaves contain cyanide compounds, including linamarin (cyanogenic glucoside) and hydrocyanic acid at levels that can be toxic. Varieties called “bitter” contain more of these compounds than so-called “sweet” varieties.

Manioc is considered to belong to a population created through an evolutionary history where human selection had and has a central and dominant role that led to the current phenotype. In this relationship, hundreds of different cultivars or varieties have been generated and distributed throughout the Americas (Clement et al., 2010). In the dominant and hegemonic story of evolutionary biology, manioc is conceived as a domesticated species: a population of individuals related by a fundamentally clonal transmission, which retained its capacity for sexual reproduction, for example by inbreeding and hybridization with wild species. The current premise is that, unlike wild species that live and diversify under the effects of natural selection, domesticated species are those that have been evolutionarily modified due to human activity, that is, as Charles Darwin affirmed: by artificial selection. In general, for the biological sciences, domestication is an evolutionary process led by people with the objective of adapting plants and animals to human needs. A fully domesticated species would be completely dependent on humans for its survival: a form of human mastery.

In evolutionary biology, manioc is considered an example of the marks of human evolution on the New World and its domestication is considered central to the emergence of agriculture in the Americas (Piperno, 2011), together with the domestication of landscapes (Clement, 1999). Managed in nature by the Amerindians, this species is understood to have passed from its wild to domesticated state at the same time as the landscapes transformed. This modernist story of the domestication of manioc and landscapes combines a number of other stories about the people of the Americas, such as the passage from a wild to a domesticated state, from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic and from nomadic hunter-gatherers to sedentary farmer-producers, and from the forest to the house, between outdoor space and domestic space, between the masculine and the feminine, in short, between nature and culture.

In this context, among current lines of neo-Darwinist research related to the scientific study of manioc, the evolution and domestication of this plant has been approached by using genetic research with molecular markers to examine its evolutionary and geographical origins (Allem, 2002; Schaal et al. 2006, Olsen and Schaal, 2006; Olsen and Schaal, 1999). Another research approach includes, in addition to genetic studies, a complementary look that compares manioc biology with that of its wild ancestors to understand the connections among them (Rival and Mckey, 2008). In this sense, the current story is that through natural selection, by artificial means, manioc had been domesticated initially in South America 8,000 -10,000 years ago (Olsen and Schaal, 2006) along with landscape and human evolution. However, the issue is controversial among evolutionary biologists on some specific points. There is debate in the literature about the exact place of origin of the species and of its passage from the wild to the domesticated (Piperno, 2011). On the other hand, there is consensus about the central role of the agency of Indigenous peoples of the Americas in the domestication of manioc by selecting organisms from wild species (Rival and Mckey, 2008).

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3 See: <https://eol.org/pages/1154718>

As anthropologist Laura Rival and her collaborators (Rival and Mckey, 2008) point out, manioc is now widely cultivated in the tropics, while Indigenous peoples in the Amazon actively transform ecological conditions of the environment to amplify the collection of a variety of cultivated plants'. This assertion is expressed in a broad field of studies from the humanities interested in understanding the human role in the evolutionary processes that involve the variation and evolution of manioc in the tropics, as well as the forms of cultivation and management carried out by Indigenous peoples and peasants. Another approach, like human ecology, indicates that manioc emerged from its wild ancestors through rational and utilitarian choices made by Indigenous peoples, in a selection process that prioritized the accumulation of starch in the root and a reduction of cyanide compounds (Wang et al. 2014), leading to a distinction between bitter and sweet varieties of manioc. Clonal propagation by cutting should then have conferred a strong agronomic advantage. During this process, the seeds and seedlings of wild ancestors were also transferred without modifications to domesticated manioc. Cultivation produced at least one evolutionary change reflected in manioc morphology that made it even more suited to tolerate environmental risks than its wild ancestor. It was through this technology and with traditional knowledge that Indigenous agriculture maintained and still maintains high levels of genetic and varietal diversity of manioc.

The assumptions that permeate these studies are that both 'cultural' and 'natural' selection produced manioc diversity through a broad cultivation system. This system was highly adapted to environmental pressures, the knowledge of farmers, categorization, and valorization of phenotypically expressed varietal differences, and the incorporation of sexually reproduced plants. All of these factors together encourage intra-varietal diversity and occasionally lead to the creation of new varieties (Rival and Mckey, 2008). The multiple forms of social organization of the various Indigenous peoples and peasants, their networks of reciprocity and kinship, as well as relations with the market, contributed, in this narrative, to the evolutionary construction of this diversity. In this natural and cultural division of the scientific field of studies on manioc, it was then up to the natural and agronomic sciences to understand the bioecological aspects of this species and its diversification. On the other hand, anthropology and human ecology has been concerned with culture, with the thought and representations of humans that give meaning and significance to this species.

When integrating the cultural with the biological dimensions of existence, manioc is conceived as a biological object that is culturally constructed. In this argument, it is human action, not biology, which gives manioc meaning or significance. This model that explains the phylogeny of domesticated species, based mainly on genetics and the morpho-physiological characteristics of an individual, would be based on what Tim Ingold called the genealogical model (Ingold, 2007). According to Ingold, we assume that organisms and people are endowed with the essential attributes or specifications (characters or identities) inherited to carry out a particular, independent way of life and promote their growth and development in an environment. In this model, the lines that connect ancestors and descendants are intergenerational transmission lines of genetic (genotypes in the case of nonhuman organisms) and cognitive information (in the case of humans). The lines provoke a strong division between what would be innate and what would be acquired; or what would be given and what would be learned or constructed, or, in other words, between nature and culture.

### **Becoming manioc-*with-others***

Evolutionary biology offers different ways to tell stories about the relationship between humans and plants, either through reflections from the field known as Eco-Evo-Devo or through theories of symbiosis. We prefer to have this biological perspective dialogue with the practices and perspectives of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous narratives of manioc's origin are well known in Brazil in multiple versions told by peoples who have cultivated it.



The Baré, for example, inhabitants of the northwest Amazon, tell us another story of manioc evolution, based on a different ontology. For them, manioc appeared in the world through the body of a teenage girl named Mani, who after her death in mythical times was buried by her mother. The manioc trunk, which was then called *maniva*,<sup>4</sup> sprouted from her body. Burgeoning *maniva* is cared for like a daughter by the female farmers who established relations of reciprocity with the feminine spirit of the field, *the mãe da roça* (mother-of-the-field). We can see this relationship in the following passage,

“Manivas were born from the earth, from people. Maniva came from an indigenous woman who one day fell sick and died. Later other people buried her body. Six months later they went to her grave and found a maniva plant there. That’s why we call it maniva because she, the indigenous woman, was called Mani. Mani died and from her body spread many seeds. In ancient times there wasn’t any manioc, only white maize. After her death manioc appeared....” (account of a Baré farmer) (Cardoso, 2010).

The emergence of manioc as part of a human body is described among the Tukano: manioc is born of an ancestral body called Basebo or Baaribo (Pārōkumu and Kehíri, 1995) who offers its parts for cultivation by female farmers. At that time several cultivated plants and agricultural spaces were created. The anthropologist Phillipe Descola describes the Nunkui myth of the plant’s origin as cultivated among the Achuar. Nunkui is a spirit, creator, and the mother of cultivated plants and with whom the horticulturists relate daily (Descola, 2004). Among the Krahô, plants are persons who have thoughts, feelings, language, and sociality, “Every plant has its way, they talk to each other, but we do not understand. They organize themselves. Plants are persons, they have voice” (Lima, 2017).

Lima reports that for this Indigenous group these plants, including manioc, are not simply born but sprout “for someone,” their human and nonhuman owners. This involves exchange, creation, care and predation and the establishment of a negotiation. In this way, Lima reports that if Krahô farmers take good care of their plants they will be seen as good mothers and their gardens will be beautiful and diverse. If they do not, the plants may become ill and abandon them to live in another person’s garden. This created an ethic of care in the sociality between women and their plants. This relationship of caring for manioc as a daughter is also widely described in the literature and substantiated by Indigenous narratives of bio-anthropo-morphic origin, in which manioc emerges from the body of an ancestor and becomes a person after being cared for and cultivated. Manioc is part of the family; it is a relative, a daughter; it has a mother in Indigenous peoples’ socialities (Empeiraire, 2000; Empeiraire et al. 2001, 2008; Descola, 2004; Cardoso, 2010).

Manioc comes from a world made up of ancestral anthropomorphic beings that, through successive series of human body-form transformations, pass into the manioc-form and subsequently relate to present-day humans. The contrast with the narrative of domestication is evident. In this Panamazonian narrative of anti-domestication (Carneiro da Cunha, 2019) and the indomesticable (Santos and Soares, 2021), manioc is not a biological object - a biological species - controlled and modified by humans in agricultural systems, but is a person, immersed in more-than-human socialities in a web of intimacy: care, diplomacy, exchange, communication, danger, and disease. All the varieties of manioc bodies are explained in these stories of origin and through the interactive processes that they have with humans and other beings that give them form, color, and names. The production of all the differences among bodies is valued as indigenous agroecology that gives priority to collection and care and not homogenization and controlled selection.

4 *Manivas* is a Tupi word for the name given by Amerindian farmers to the stem of the manioc that is cut into pieces for planting by asexual reproduction.

In this context, we propose that when identifying manioc it is important to consider its innumerable diversity of varieties, multiple social lives, and the multiple stories of sympoietic differentiation that occur throughout a lifetime together with the lifecycles of other beings (and other things) that are connected to the cycles of manioc.

Considering how this differentiation process is expressed, there are several modes of manioc social life that inhabit the fields of different peasants and Indigenous peoples in the tropics. Notably, in the Amazon, for example, anthropologists and ethnobotanists have recorded more than a hundred different varieties identified by Indigenous peoples (Chernela, 1986; Emperaire and Peroni, 2007; Boster, 1983; Elias et al. 2000; Heckler and Zent, 2008; Oliveira et al. 2021). Each manioc-body is grouped not only according to its physical similarities, such as stem shape, root color and format, and the amount and color of its leaves, but also by considering its life, niche, time of maturity, development on certain types of land, associations with other species and geographical origins. If this distinction points to an apparent ontological distance among “varieties,” we can think of this distinction, not in terms of essentials and rigid boundaries, but as a performative process along a social life coordinated with other lives in a relational environment. To do this, we must identify a type of *becoming*, a life in constant co-formation, co-development, and which is entangled in multi-specific meshworks with other lives and things.

**Figure 1.** Entangled manioc and female bodies on the Rio Negro, Brazil, by (Thiago Mota Cardoso)



Manioc bodies *become with* people, mycorrhizae, soil, ants, pollinators, fungi, larvae, wind, solar rays, and water. With their humans (fig.1), they move and circulate in micro-places, regions and across trans-oceanic borders. This is similar to the perspective of many Indigenous and peasant collectives, which understand that manioc social life is entangled and interdependent with other “others,” but it also serves as a reminder of the difficulty generated by efforts to conceptualize species (Tsing, 2012, 2018).

Farmers and agronomists know that to thrive, manioc depends on more-than-human relationships and coordination. Coordination here is defined as material entanglements (Gan, 2017; Gan and Tsing, 2018), that is, as that which transforms and creates modes of existence through encounters with “the other,” in common worlds. Coordination allows us to observe actions and emergences without the need for intentional communication or mutual clarity among participants. Take, for example, their relationship with fungi, the mycorrhizae that colonize manioc roots. The symbiosis established between different endomycorrhizal fungi and manioc roots is an example of interaction in which both reciprocally benefit each other. Studies have concluded that since manioc does not have a root system sufficiently branched to absorb phosphorus from the soil – when cultivated in agricultural systems it benefits from the hyphae that these mycorrhizas develop in their roots. The hyphae play the role of absorbing “fur,” and in return, the mycorrhizae receive energy from the plant in the form of carbohydrates (Habte and Byappanahalli, 1994).

Let’s see another interspecies example. In the Amazon, there are insects that “take care” of manioc seeds and support their sexual life and thus contribute to the resurgence of manioc in the landscape. Manioc produces pollen, which is captured by insects, which in turn contribute to interbreeding and the formation of seeds, which explode and fall to the ground. The seeds are carried by arthropods to their burrows in the ground. A seed in the earth becomes dormant while the manioc cycle takes place on the landscape. In this resurgent process the dormant manioc seed sprouts after vegetation is burned and a new field is created for cultivation. After years of dormancy these seeds blossom after the resumption of agricultural activity with the use of fire. In the Rio Negro region, manioc that is born from seeds and not by the direct care of a farmer is initially referred to as being *without-a-mother* (Cardoso, 2010) and then adopted and replanted: an act of care, an act of love.

Considering other beings that live with manioc, but in a not so positive relationship, approximately two hundred species of arthropods have been recorded to interact with manioc (Farias and Bellotti, 2006). The *mandrová* (*Ello sphinx* moth) is considered one of the most important manioc companions according to studies about plagues in agronomy texts. Since the *Ello sphinx* can consume a high quantity of foliage, it can reduce root yield and lead to the death of very young plants. Manioc can also coexist with forty species of mites that feed on its leaves, sucking the cellular contents, leaving the leaves yellowish and altering root development. The lace bug also feeds on the leaves of manioc, mainly on some sweeter varieties, leaving them yellowish. Cochineals, when sucking the sap, produce a substance with a high sugar content that serves as a medium for fungi growth, such as “sooty mold” that can cover the leaves and the petiole, which affects photosynthesis.

**Figure 2.** Manioc seeds visited by insects, by Thiago Mota Cardoso



Many other beings (fig.2) are reported to interact with manioc: thrips, whiteflies, cassava shoot flies, fruit flies, *Sternocoelus* weevils, locusts, ants, termites, larvae, proteobacteria, fungi that cause rot, viruses, nematodes, and squamous insects. Manioc's interactions with the gall midge, for example, can make the roots thin and fibrous. Throughout its growth and development, new agents appear in manioc's meshwork of interaction, coupling its life cycle with adventitious herbs or animals, wind, solar rays, rocks, water, the moon, and protective spirits, which all at different times create groups of different forms that interact and become with manioc (Arruda Campos, 2016).

### **Manioc Persistence in Landscape Resurgence**

The location of manioc's multispecies coordination is agricultural landscapes. Gardens host confluences of multiple temporalities of beings that occupy the land during resurgence processes, which are socio-ecological responses to a "disturbance" - any quick ecological change, such as farming practices (fig. 3). Resurgence arises from the ability of plants and animals to move around and make their own rearrangements and contributions to restoring Indigenous and peasant landscapes after a slow disturbance (Tsing, 2017). The concept of resurgence highlights manioc's life cycles and its relationship with other living and non-living beings in gardens. The different temporal phases in a garden - as in an Indigenous agroforestry system - involve different stages of ecological succession in which manioc grows and is cared for by humans, while a multiplicity of organisms collaborate or compete to proliferate. In the ecological simplification of a modernist plantation model, the landscape is shaped to prevent resurgence and multiplicity.

Land is one of these human and nonhuman beings with which manioc intra-acts throughout its social life. Manioc is maintained in relational processes that interweave different maniocs with different qualities of earth, while maintaining the multiplicity of lives that are entangled in heterogeneous assemblages in the resurgence of the landscape. Although manioc grows best in loamy, sandy soils of moderate fertility, it can grow in soils too infertile to support other crops and is, therefore, often planted in marginal areas. However, as Gudeman and Rivera (1990) emphasize, soil has an important role as a promoter of life among peasants in Central America, since land is more than the quantitative sum of nutrients. The Pataxó of Northeast Brazil as well as Indigenous peoples from the lower Rio Negro region affirm that the land is alive (Cardoso, 2010; Cardoso, 2018). They highlight that different types of land provide different conditions for each type of manioc and describe how the cultivation of plants influences the soil's development and transformations. Land in these ontoepistemologies is a living material agency that expresses itself as strong or weak, rested or tired, depending on whether agricultors incorporate a multiplicity of beings in an agroecosystem.

**Figure 3.** In the middle of a resurgence by (Thiago Mota Cardoso)



For the vivacity of earth to persist in resurgence dynamics, it is important to look at the temporalities of the assemblage of organisms that work together to create landscapes. In an Indigenous agroforestry system, manioc is cultivated with dozens of other species in crop fields created by clearing the forest and burning vegetation. After two or three years, and with the perception of lower manioc productivity as the land becomes “weak” or “tired”, the deforested area becomes forest again. This happens through a process of resurgence that includes an “invasion” of weeds and pests and management of fruit trees, which Indigenous peoples of the Amazon call “*capoeiras*” (secondary forests). These environmental resurgence dynamics that entangle humans and nonhumans are often mentioned in the literature (Descola, 2004; Posey and Ballée, 1989; Chernela, 1986; Emperaire and Peroni, 2007; Elias, 2000; Rival and MacKey, 2008; Danevan et al., 1984; Eloy, 2005; Martins, 2005; Cardoso et al., 2010). We can understand this dynamic as Indigenous and peasant technospheres, local modes of coordinating the myriad of lives that contribute to the ecological reconstitution of the forest and the vivacity of the soils.

Manioc and the other lives that interact with it within heterogeneous agricultural systems steer us toward the concept of multispecies world-making based on the ecological process of resurgence. For example, Philippe Descola (2004) shows how the Achuar of Ecuador cultivate a wide variety of manioc and other plant species from the forest or secondary vegetation. Animals and weeds, which compose the landscape and compete with the cultivated plants, constantly visit the gardens. The same occurs in the gardens of Indigenous peoples of the Rio Negro region (Cardoso, 2010) and in Southern Bahia (Arruda Campos, 2016) where, in resurgent spatiotemporal processes, plants cross boundaries between gardens and forest. It is in this resurgent process that the modernist dualisms such as the domestic and the wild are broken.

For the Achuar, the house is the focus of social life, and is located at the center of the garden, which in turn is surrounded by a vast area of forest, which is a place of spirits and other human and nonhuman beings. Although a man is expected to prepare a field for each of his wives, cultivation, maintenance, and harvesting are exclusively the work of women. This contrasts with activities in the hunting zone, a space of risk where men dominate and women venture only when accompanied by their husbands. Motherhood, among the Achuar also extends to a woman's relationship with the plants that grow in the spaces she cultivates. She has, so to speak, two sets of offspring, the plants in her garden and the children in her home. Also, despite a peaceful appearance, agricultural fields are as full of threats as the surrounding forest. For the Achuar, manioc has the power to suck the blood of human infants. In this case there is no strong dualism between savage and domestic. In the case of the Wajapi, manioc is a seductive plant (Oliveira, 2019).

According to Ingold (2000), orthodox anthropological concepts would see an opposition between the forest and agricultural spaces, making a sharp distinction between the wild and the domesticated when analyzing the Achuar case. But this, as Descola shows, would be deeply at odds with Achuar understandings. For the construction and maintenance of their cultivated fields, the Achuar do not see themselves to be taming the untouched world of the forest. The conception that there is a border between wild and domesticated plants, understood as a separation between nature and culture, does not make much sense to and is clearly problematic for several peoples, including the Achuar. "Wild" and "domestic" plants are not understood to be involved in separate evolutionary dramas. Plants are involved in continuous interactions with other nonhuman beings in resurgent landscapes in which they are entangled, making porous the border between domestic and wild.

The continuity of this history of resurgence through agrobiodiversity dynamics in manioc fields has created landscapes over large temporal scales. Archeology has demonstrated how this spatiotemporal relationship involving human, manioc, and land consists of coevolutionary pasts, contributing over centuries to the creation of the so-called highly fertile Amazonian black earth (*terra preta de índio*) (Fraser and Clement, 2008). These lands are involved in formative processes through the interactions in the multispecies meshworks shaped over history, composing a cluster of residues from dead bodies, living organisms, beings and their tracks (such as human practices). The story of the Amazonian black earth led them to understand that the possibilities that manioc's way of life offered allowed large human groups to inhabit the Amazon. These millenary groupings were based on intimate interrelations with manioc (Heckenberger, 1998; Clement, 1999).

## Life is movement

Manioc social life involves movement and encounters in flows that transcend places and particularities, blurring the boundaries between local and global, contributing to the possibilities of relationships. Manioc has circulated and circulates on very wide scales, allowing us to refer to a global manioc civilization. Its local and regional circulation and movement is well described among Indigenous groups, either by migration or circulation of *manivas*.

In a local context, among the many Indigenous and peasant groups with which manioc is immersed in intimate relationships with humans, manioc entangled with women producing coordinated cycles throughout their journeys and life trajectories, which are impossible to describe in a single story. At the interstices of the fields, plants circulate through the planting and replanting of their stems (*manivas*), causing them to move through places, secondary vegetation, fields, houses (fig. 4), families, and on a local and continental scale (Cardoso, 2010; Cardoso et al., 2010; Emperaire and Peroni, 2007; Kawa et al., 2013; Pautasso et al., 2013).

Each mode of manioc social life (or each manioc assemblage), and its relational and corporeal varieties, also produces new relations after its 'death'. That is, the moment it is withdrawn from the land, multiple interactions are established with different parts of the manioc body. As we have seen, the stem can return to the earth, regrow, or circulate among people who appreciate the specificity and quality of the variety. The roots enter into socio-technical circuits, they are processed and entangle relationships in places like the *casas de farinhas* (flour houses) and kitchens where manioc flour and its byproducts - such as *tapioca*, *beijus*, *cauins*, cakes, and *paçocas* are made. These food products connect new people and things in larger networks, be it at the level of homes when feeding children, or at the community level with rituals such as gift offerings, or even in regional and international markets, such as manioc production in Africa and Asia that penetrates "ethnic" markets in European countries. The life of manioc is a continuum of movement involving co-habitation and co-development, in intimate relationships with humans and other beings.

On a global scale, *maniva* left the Americas, participating directly in the establishment of slave colonies in the southern hemisphere by the Portuguese empire in the Americas and Africa (Piperno, 2011), undertaking a global circulation<sup>5</sup>. The consequences of this movement for human history were manifold and laid the basis for the European colonization of the Americas. In the plantation areas of the colonial period, manioc was consumed mainly as flour. In the 16th century, Portuguese settlers used Indigenous slave labor on both manioc and sugarcane plantations, but by the end of the century, African slaves began to replace the Indigenous peoples as a source of forced labor. Manioc flour was one of the main items Luso-Brazilians exchanged for African slaves in West and Central Africa. However, it took several years for manioc cultivation to be transferred to the other side of the Atlantic. The most common variety of manioc is poisonous, and the Portuguese and Africans in Brazil used Indigenous techniques to extract the poison from the plant and make flour (Freitas, 2011).

When the Portuguese and Spanish landed in the Americas, Indigenous peoples already cultivated manioc in resurgent and multispecific landscapes. The colonial process replaced these resurgent systems with plantations and the logic of domestication, while simultaneously creating practices and ideologies to expel manioc and its cultivators to the margins of the system in spaces not occupied by colonial plantation. Viewed as a "plant of the poor" or an "Indian plant" by the colonialists, manioc and its people were used to maintain the colonial system of the South Atlantic.

In the political ecology of colonial plantations, in the seventeenth century manioc flour became one of the "cornerstones of the South Atlantic economy," not only as the main food source for the crews of slave ships but also for slaves waiting for embarkation at African ports, and troops involved with the slave trade. Alongside sweet potatoes and maize, manioc flour served as a source of sustenance for captives, soldiers, and slave traffickers on the land, sea and, rivers in colonial times (Alencastro, 2000). The original manioc importations by Africa were probably quite small and obtained by the Portuguese on the Brazilian coast from Indigenous Tupi groups who brought the crop from tall forests early in the 15th century (Jones, 1959). These cultivars were likely adaptable to West African forest regions where slash-and-burn agriculture was widely established. In southern Benin, the introduction of manioc and the history of returnees from South America are closely linked.

<sup>5</sup> From 1492 onwards, different species of animals, plants, viruses and bacteria were exchanged between the Old and the New World following their human symbiotic companions.

Manioc also arrived on Asian landscapes (see Ellen and Souselisa, 2012; Ellen et al. 2012; Hohnholz, 1980) such as in Indonesia where after the year 1900 manioc consumption increased so rapidly that its byproducts became a major part of staple diets, which remains true today. There is no evidence of pre-Columbian dispersal of any of the American root crops to other parts of the world. Moreover, these crops most likely arrived in archipelagic Southeast Asia well after 1511, the date of the Portuguese conquest of Malacca and the first direct Portuguese contact with the Moluccan spice-trade centers. The French took manioc from the Guiana coast to Reunion and Mauritius, and later to Madagascar. Manioc is first unequivocally mentioned in Dutch sources regarding Indonesia in 1781. It was probably transported from Mauritius to Batavia. An alternative potential route was that followed by Spanish vessels sailing westward in the 16th century from the Pacific coast of Mexico to the Philippines. Stem cuttings, however, did not have the same storage potential as maize seeds or sweet potato tubers, and may not have survived voyages longer than a few weeks. Thus, it is more plausible that there was a series of introductions across the globe that staggered from one place to another, connected by the shortest possible sea voyages, thus establishing pan-tropical global circumnavigation. In contrast to South American and African landscapes, where (with some exceptions such as Nigeria) manioc is predominantly cultivated in small resurgent agricultural systems for local consumption, in Asian countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia large industrial production and processing developed during the 20th century. This sector is highlighted by the starch and “pellet” industries that target international markets and most of the manioc produced is for the industrialization of these two products.

Through movements to new places, and new encounters, in contemporary times manioc enters modernist agronomic projects. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, although a diverse range of local manioc varieties in Africa had been registered, the yield of most of the African cultivars was low. On this continent, manioc found new companions in the ecology of life such as the white fly that transmits the African virus responsible for manioc (or cassava) mosaic disease (CMD). This disease had not been reported in Latin America and was being spread by vegetative propagation, from stakes of infected plants. This situation caused the Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Tanzanian governments, for example, to start manioc-breeding programs to develop cultivars resistant to the disease (Beck, 1982).

Associated with the growing expansion of manioc and its diseases in the agricultural plantations in Africa and Asia, in the 1970s research centers were created for ex-situ conservation, genetic improvement, and the development of varieties adapted to “more productive” monoculture systems. Cultivation practices and the multispecies relationships that circulated from the colonial period until contemporary times have been replaced by manioc domestication on plantations. In Brazil, as well as in Africa and Asia, manioc has recently entered socio-technical environments through so-called plant genetic resources conservation networks (Santoniere, 2015). Considered a genetic resource by biologists and agronomists, manioc entered ex-situ conservation efforts and in the 1970s these efforts stimulated the establishment of a worldwide network of Centers for the Conservation of Genetic Resources located in regions considered to have high genetic variability by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). In 1974, the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (*Embrapa*) recognized the strategic importance of genetic resources and created the National Center for Genetic Resources (*CENARGEN*). Since then, collections of germplasm have been organized in various decentralized agronomic laboratories. The main objective has been the genetic improvement and laboratory manufacture of clones with desired characteristics and manioc has been included in these genetic improvement projects because it is considered a key genetic resource and food in Brazil and other parts of the world. Manioc is now controlled in “cold” sophisticated laboratories yet anchored in the “warmth” of interspecies relations in various agricultural landscapes.

Manioc social life thus combines intimate stories of love and resistance of “marginal” peoples with stories of domestication through coercion and domination on colonial plantations and in industrial agriculture.



**Figure 4.** Manioc diversity in the Munduruku village, Brazil, by Thiago Mota Cardoso



### **Assemblage of maniocs as symbiopolitics**

Manioc and its different forms of expression has not disappeared from Amerindian landscapes, despite the massacres caused by colonial “encounters”. Its proliferation is not only associated with global trade, and its Indigenous companions have not become “extinct.” (Clement, 1999) In contemporary times, manioc has been “allied” with riverside communities and Indigenous peoples who have sought to live a more autonomous life, opposing the extractive capitalist systems that have searched for labor to remove the forest’s diverse products. Some of those who lived with manioc became more independent from the market system, but simultaneously connected to it, since the Amazonian extractive system absorbed flour produced by “independent” farmers. The same occurred during the days of the rubber plantations with the extraction of latex from rubber trees.

Rubber tappers knew that living with manioc, planting it, caring for it and obtaining food and other ritualistic components provided freedom from the extractive system that sought to exploit maximum production in the shortest possible time. The relentless political power of these markets made it impossible for other plants and living beings to form relationships. In the Atlantic Forest region in Brazil, since the sixteenth century, and more recently on a smaller scale, manioc cultivation by small peasant farmers took place on the margins of coffee plantations and other export products such as sugarcane (Dean, 1997). While coercion and alienation prevailed on plantations, causing the depletion of animals, plants, land, and people, in small fields of peasants there was care, reciprocity and multispecies landscapes were formed.

In recent decades many territories legally dedicated to environmental preservation unfortunately require the absence of humans and cultivated plants, and thus reject the politics of living together, or symbiopolitics (Helmreich, 2014), that entangles humans and manioc. For example, to resist expulsion from their lands because of the creation of a national park in the 1960s, in which human presence and uses were not permitted inside its boundaries, the Pataxó, inhabitants of Southern Bahia, Brazil, sealed an alliance with manioc and undertook a process to retake their traditional territory. The Pataxó struggle in conjunction with manioc made it possible

for humans, manioc and other assemblages to return to their familiar places and led to the re-establishment of resurgent gardens that challenge the power of park rangers who sought at all costs to eliminate people and manioc from within the national park (Arruda Campos, 2016).

In the Anthropocene, amid efforts to create conditions for human survival despite the destruction of landscapes and climate change, manioc is sometimes referred to as the “drought, war and famine crop of the “third world” and reliance upon this crop is expected to increase in coming years as the global climate changes. Some scientists affirm that manioc has the potential to help many countries achieve food security in a sustainable manner, in the face of significant environmental change. Manioc could then become known not only as a crop that can combat “famine” or “poverty” but also as a player in efforts to adapt to climate change. It is an “Anthropocenic” crop, due to its strong capacity for resistance and resilience to droughts (Ceballos et al., 2011; Burns et al., 2010; Jarvis et al., 2012).

### **Final considerations: a sympoietical proposal**

Manioc is not only good for eating or thinking about, but also for building relationships, living with, and for conducting political action and resistance in the Anthropocene (see Oliveira, 2020). For this reason, our purpose is not to affirm facts about manioc, but to consider the intimacy of its ecologies to help notice its relationships and the processes in which it becomes entangled. Our proposal is also to decentralize the role of humans, as exclusive agents in manioc’s evolutionary transformation. Humans, in this story, do have a relevant role in the assemblage of manioc ecology, they are not only supporting actors in this performative encounter, but also act in stories of care, affection, pleasure, domination, resistance, and movement that occur in complex multispecies entanglements.

What we sought to problematize regarding manioc as a domesticated species in this article is the exceptional focus on the role of humans: the Western narrative of progress. This story, in addition to treating each plant as an individual, treats the diversification that occurs in these organisms through the optics of a natural or agricultural selection force. In this perspective, there is an external agent, an outside force that imposes the direction of change on organisms, without considering the reciprocal and mutual influences among living beings, and between organisms and the rest of their *unwelt*. Moreover, when referring to artificial selection, this narrative about organisms emphasizes the idea of human exceptionalism, giving form and meaning to a passive and objectified nature. Through domestication story, “manioc life” disappears in the presence of a human design. Before its own condition of existence is recognized, manioc becomes a natural resource, a biological object to be controlled. We focus on manioc to argue that the narrative of its domestication by humans, understood as its passage from a wild to a domesticated state through human selective and adaptive processes and progress, with subsequent diversification, invisibilizes a process that could be understood as more interactive and complex. For these reasons and due to the attentiveness of this plant to each ethnographic situation, we argue that the concept of domestication is only one way to conceive of manioc sociality, which has informed human control practices of this plant throughout the recent modernist narrative.

When considering manioc “domestication” we encounter the idea that genes are replicators of information through which essence determines form. We also find the idea of human exceptionalism, which affirms that humans construct nature through production and representations. These concepts create impediments because they conceive of species as given biological entities, excluding the effect of the lives of manioc on the lives of other beings, as well as the multispecific processes of landscape formation. Anna Tsing calls attention to the fact that the emphasis on domestication is unidirectional and ignores the concept that other beings can also change humans. Furthermore, for Tsing, domestication tends to be imagined as a sharp dividing line:

“Either you are in the human fold or you are out in the wild.” (Tsing, 2012) Agricultural science has an inherent history of human “dominance” involving a presumption of plant control by human that impact “nature”, rather than an interdependence of ways of life. Tsing affirms:

Because this dichotomisation stems from an ideological commitment to human mastery, it supports the most outrageous fantasies of domestic control, on the one hand, and wild species self-making, on the other. Through such fantasies, domestics are condemned to life imprisonment and genetic standardisation, while wild species are ‘preserved’ in gene banks while their multispecies landscapes are destroyed (Tsing, 2012: 144).

Following this perspective we could argue that one of the limitations to the domestication approaches to manioc and other plants is that they have led us to imagine the ‘human species’ being, or rather the practice of being a species, as something autonomous, self-produced throughout history and among cultures and not entangled in other relationships with other beings and things. Van Dooren (Van Dooren, 2012: 25) proposes that “within this context, the human *invention* of agriculture might be rethought in a way that also acknowledges the *teaching* of agriculture to humans by plants.” He also affirms that valuing and learning to tell stories of these places of multispecies interaction, where new modes of social life emerge, expressed in new forms and ways of life, may allow us to tell alternative stories about the relationship between humans and their companions in the Anthropocene era.

We can learn a lot from the Indigenous peoples of the Americas for whom species are processes, species are verbs. We are not able to account for all the relationships that accompany the intimate interactions involving manioc and humans. Thus we suggest thinking of manioc as a verb, to see the manioc apparatus as a situated assemblage, contingent on relational environments and multiplicities of histories. Relational approaches offer alternatives to the traditional explanatory genealogical model for manioc that is based mainly on genetic mutations and the morpho-physiological characteristics of individual plants, followed by cultural or artificial selection. These relational approaches position living beings as results of their relationships, that is, as *processes* resulting from encounters among organisms and other beings and things, humans or nonhumans. Relational approaches have been conveyed in different studies on embryology, evolution, animal development and immunology, which present living beings as resulting from multiple relationships within a given environmental context. If we change the history of relationships, that is if we change the recognized components of the relationship, the time or synchrony of the encounters, then the result, the history, changes. Relational perspectives in biology have the potential to dialogue with anthropology and Amerindian thought for future studies of multispecies relationships in plant worlds.

Manioc, considering all of its differences, are organisms that have become with humans and landscapes over time. In this proposal manioc is a composite, a multispecies social life<sup>6</sup>. If our argument has value to a research project, we could think of manioc and its differentiation as historical (evolutionary), ontoepistemological and generative processes of assemblages. It is in this sense that Donna Haraway (2008) inspires us to think of manioc as a “companion species”. Anna Tsing (2012) inspires us to *live with manioc*, showing us that we are composites, fundamentally multispecific in our way of life, by suggesting that by cultivating other lives we become open organisms<sup>7</sup> that constantly evolve with other species. These authors reveal that the idea of human control over nature (domestication) never really materializes, leaving gaps where multispecies life acts.

6 In the work of Thom van Dooren (Van Dooren, *Flight ways*), the notion of way of life is central to how he conceives species. Van Dooren proposes approaching species in such a way that an individual organism is not so much a member of a class or type but participant in an evolutionary process in relation to innumerable other beings and things. Thus, species do not simply “occur” but must be achieved with each generation in a process of co-development. He criticizes the fact that often these “other” beings are reduced to mere names and numbers, because of the emphasis given to an objective impartiality when describing facts in research.

7 Each organism is interconnected to others, making it difficult to establish limits, or following Scott Gilbert et al. “*A Symbiotic View of Life*”, we were never individuals (2012).

We look at the complexity of this story in the hopes of understanding the “domestic” no longer as the “controlled,” or the “unproblematic” in a categorical opposition to the complex and powerful notion of the “savage/wild,” the “uncontrollable”, and thus between culture and nature (Ingold, 2000; Viveiros de Castro, 1998). In other words, we could write ethnographic descriptions that go beyond the great dichotomies between nature and culture, wild and domesticated, subject and object, fully recognizing the contingent and emergent local-global stories surrounding the more-than-human socialities of manioc. This was our risky narrative/proposal, to issue a call to emerge from dualism, this insidious distinction produced during the colonial era.

Manioc must be brought back to life. The various ontologies of Indigenous peoples and peasants present stories of animated lives. We must also establish an ethics of responsibility towards the significant others with whom we live, a story of *becoming-with* in deeper intimate relations.

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# A *Terreiro* That's “Too Young, Too gay”: Technologies of Persistence and growth in the W/world

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## Abstract

In this manuscript I present how in the city of Tabatinga (AM) -- on the triple border between Brazil, Peru, and Colombia -- the *Father Jairo and His Children Network* are engaged in a process of persistence, care, and growth in order to traverse a World that presents itself as a threat to their lives and their worlds. This process involves the consolidation of a technology of housing in the World, empowered by the grammar of *Umbanda/Macumba*, connected with youth, gender, and (homo)sexuality. Its material “ground” is the process of construction of the group's *terreiro*. Based on 10 years of ethnography and in dialogue with theoretical discussions regarding cosmopolitics, materialities, and W/world(s) in de/anti/contracolonial perspectives, I argue that through this process, the network has built a world-for-them/us ( $wf\#$ ) that enables it to cross the World-as-Threat ( $WfT$ ) and to recall the World-as-struggle ( $W/s$ ):  $WfT \gg wf\# \ll W/s$ .

**Key words:** gender, borders, the Amazon, cosmopolitics, sexuality, care.

# Um terreiro “muito jovem e muito gay”: tecnologias de persistência e crescimento no M/mundo

## Resumo

Nesse artigo apresento como, na cidade de Tabatinga (AM), na tríplice fronteira entre Brasil, Peru e Colômbia, o Pai Jairo e seus filhos engajaram-se num processo de persistência, cuidado e crescimento através de um Mundo que se lhes apresenta enquanto ameaça para suas vidas e seus mundos. Este processo envolve a consolidação de uma tecnologia de habitação do Mundo, alimentada na gramática da *Umbanda/Macumba* e conectada com operadores de juventude, gênero e (homo)sexualidade. Sua base material, seu “chão”, é o processo de construção de um *terreiro*. Baseado em 10 anos de etnografia e em diálogo com discussões teóricas sobre cosmopolíticas, materialidades e M/mundos em perspectivas de/anti/contracoloniais, argumento que através deste processo, esta rede constrói um mundo-para-si (mf#) que em sua prática habilita a atravessar o Mundo-come-Ameaça (MfA) em termos de uma relação de embate (Mundo-come-embate: M/e) virtualmente simetrizante: MfA>>wf#<<M/e.

**Palavras chave:** gênero, fronteiras, Amazônia, cosmopolítica, sexualidade, cuidado.

# A *Terreiro* That's “Too Young, Too gay”: Technologies of Persistence and growth in the W/world

José Miguel Nieto Olivar

In this manuscript, I present how, in the city of Tabatinga (AM), on the triple border between Brazil, Peru, and Colombia, the *Father* (of saint)<sup>1</sup> *Jairo and His Children Network* are engaged in a process of persistence, care, and growth in order to traverse a World that presents itself as a threat to their lives and their worlds. This process involves the consolidation of a technology of growth and housing in the World, empowered by the practice and the grammar of *Umbanda* (an Afro-Brazilian religion), connected with youth, gender, and (homo)sexuality. Its material “ground” is the process of construction of the network's *terreiro*<sup>2</sup>.

My use of the term “worlds” derives from the intersection of the ethnographic experience with theoretical discussions on cosmopolitics, materialities, and W/world(s) and their ends (Stengers, 2015; Dela Cadena & Blaser, 2018) in de/anti/counter-colonial perspectives (Anzaldúa, 1987; Santos, 2015; Silva, 2017, 2019; Mombaça, 2021). This approach is inspired by the ethnographic work of Nóbrega (2019), to which I will return later. A *cosmopolitical* (Stengers, 2018) and *pluriversal* (Dela Cadena & Blaser, 2018) approach allows me to communicate and enact experiences of creativity, sociality, relative autonomy and participation in the World: all things I learned within this network<sup>3</sup>.

I will argue that throughout this process, this network has built a world-for-us/them ( $wf\#$ ) that enables it to cross the World-as-Threat ( $WfT$ ) to create the World-as-struggle ( $W/s$ ):  $WfT \gg wf\# \ll W/s$ . In this construction, “growing up”, an emic category, is a central theme that has a strongly material dimension and is anchored in relationships of mutual implication between bodies, network, family, *terreiro*, and entities.

This work derives from ethnographical research begun in 2010<sup>4</sup>, originally focused on understanding the transborder mobilities associated with sexual markets along and across the Brazil-Colombia border (Olivar, 2015, 2016, 2017; Olivar and Melo, 2018; Melo and Olivar, 2019; Olivar, Melo and Tobón, 2021). Since 2011, I have followed the *Father Jairo and His Children Network*. In 2011, 2012, and 2015, I lived four months each year in Tabatinga. In 2013 I lived for four months in Leticia, the Colombian portion of this transborder city. In 2016, 2018, and 2020 I conducted annual visits to this region of about two weeks each. From the beginning,

1 TN: To be of *saint* is to be follower of Afro-Brazilian religions; father or mother as a leadership, with him/her children (sons and daughters) and other religious kinship positions.

2 TN: *Terreiro* is the space or temple.

3 For this “housing the World”, “to build a world”, construction and “making a world”, I follow Latour (2008), Haraway (2016) and Tsing (2015). Follow, for example, the Note 6 in pg 44 from Latour (2008), or the concept of “worlding” in Haraway (2016).

4 Research conducted with financing from the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP), through three successive scholarships: a post-doctoral scholarship (2010/50077-10), a Young Researcher scholarship (2013/26826-2), both within the auspices of the Núcleo de Estudos de Gênero PAGU, of Unicamp, and a Regular Auxiliary Scholarship (2019/01714-3) in the Faculdade de Saúde Pública da USP. I also had resources from the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq) through my participation in the “Trânsitos, crime e fronteiras: gênero, tráfico de pessoas e mercados do sexo no Brasil” Project, Process: 404868/2012-6, coordinated by Dr. Adriana Piscitelli. Finally, this manuscript was translated with financial aid by FAPESP through the project “Cosmopolitics of Care at the end-of-the-world”, Young Researcher Grant -Phase 2 (process 2021/06897-9), and finished with the support of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CLACS) at Brown University (RI, USA), where I worked as visiting professor between January and June 2023.

this network, mainly in terms of its “gay”, “girl” and “*transvesti*”<sup>5</sup> lines, was one of my main sources of knowledge and relationships. The 2018 and 2020 visits were carried out within the framework of the realization of a film project called *Babado*, under the direction of Camila Freitas and João Viera Torres<sup>6</sup>.

It is important to mention that the present article is not situated in the field of religious studies. Future developments may be made in this direction comparison with other analogous ethnographic accounts and in collaborative work. Additionally, the review of, comparisons with, and the “transformative perspective” of studies (Banaggia, 2014) on Afro-Brazilian religions in intersection with youth, geopolitical location, gender variability, and sexual dissidence may offer further ethnographic and analytical insights that enrich interpretations of this article and the fields of studies it touches upon<sup>7</sup>. This paper is an ethnographic and anthropological narrative/fable of a situated experience observing how a *terreiro* that was too young and too gay came to existence, that deals with the theoretical problem of the combative persistence of lives and worlds that, under different totalizing and conflicting power regimes, would not be possible or desirable.

## W/worlds

Márcia Nóbrega (2019) studies the ways in which “the people” of an island in the São Francisco River (northeast Brazilian *sertão*) – a black, afro-indigenous, rural *people* – mobilize the composition of the world, its land and water, among living humans, dead, souls, and *caboclos*<sup>8</sup>, in recomposing the W/world after (in temporal and fluvial terms) the construction of the Sobradinho Hydroelectric Power Plant disrupted it. Among others, Nóbrega (2019) draws on the work of Peruvian anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena (2010, 2018). In *A World of Many Worlds*, De la Cadena & Blaser (2018) organize and hybridize seeds from the Zapatista movement, Peruvian indigenous cosmologies, the ethnographic work and *cosmopolitics* of Isabelle Stengers (2018), creating a source for the political discussion of worlds that are not (ontologically) exhausted in the World (and therefore creating the distinction between the uppercase and lowercase use of this term, and others, that I employ here)<sup>9</sup>. This study of W/worlds and their relationships (“human” worlds, worlds of entities, worlds of the spirits and the dead, animal and plant worlds, and “Modern” worlds of “whites”), Nóbrega included, details disasters, catastrophes, environmental crimes, colonization, and technological and extractive imperative of capitalism: certain(ly) Endings of Worlds<sup>10</sup>.

5 I use these three terms emically. “Gay” is a sometimes encompassing category of diverse homosexualities, mainly male, at a junction of gender and sexuality, producing, in many local explanations of gender, “men”, “women” and “gays”. It is also used specifically for “male” homosexual experiences, involving in many cases travestis, trans women or “girls”. Often a “girl” might be labeled, in the intimacy of the group, as “gay” and use her masculine name without creating discomfort. Yet, Samara, one of the “girls”, in 2021 classified the Network’s sons and daughters like this: Men, Women, Gays and Trans..

6 Currently, *Babado* is heading to post-production and its first cut at Duas Mariola Produções. For a teaser, see: <https://vimeo.com/448164053>

7 It is important to comment that gender and sexuality matters are not new in studies on religions of Afro-Brazilian matrix (Birman, 2005)(see Strongman, 2002; Santos, 2009; Pereira, 2012; Rosario and Gonçalves, 2022 for revision focused on homosexuality), but they are still a minority. Discussions about *terreiro* trans people and trans youth, either from the key of religion or from the key of generational studies, are even scarcer (see Pereira, 2017, 2018; Souza et al, 2014). We still know little about how in places like Tabatinga, young gay, trans, lesbian girls, who go through heavy contexts of violence and abjection, produce their possibilities to grow and flourish through *terreiros* and *macumbas*.

8 TN: Mixed indigenous-white-black people not formally part of an indigenous group and also an important group of entities in afro-indigenous Brazilian religions.

9 I am using the notion of *cosmopolitics* as a disruptive and connective intervention enabling the multiple/simultaneous, current *and* virtual, to cross and compose [un]common worlds, against, through and despite the unifying effort of the World in its technical and sequentialist layers, policies, colonization, and civilization (Stengers, 2018). In this sense, the use of the lowercase w (wf#) seeks to retain the mark of minorization (being a *minor*, being “minor”) (Deleuze, 2005) while mobilizing the power of a multiplicity without Unity expressed by the formula  $n-1$  (Deleuze & Guattari, 2008). The 1 that is subtracted in order to enable the multiplicity of the lower-case minor is precisely the Capitalized form of unity with and of affection for the colonial Norm. The asymmetry and the interweaving of worlds/World are thus understood here as a given.

10 Authors such as Danowsky & Viveiros de Castro (2014); Kopenawa and Albert (2015), Stengers (2015), Haraway (2016), De la Cadena & Blaser (2018), Tsing (2015), Tsing et al (2017), Krenak (2019), Latour (2014, 2017) among others, have been thinking about contemporary planetary-local crises in the relationship between technological intensification and the exploitation of natural resources, persistence of devastating human necropolitics, crises in global scientific-political fields, and climate change. Black anti-racist radical authors as Denise Ferreira da Silva (2019) and Jota Mombaça (2021), following the long way of authors as Fanon, Cesaire, Spillers, and so, have built another position in the End-of-the-World conversation: how to act toward the end

It was hard to “see” the End of the World in the sexual, urban and cosmopolitical capillarity of Pai Jairo and His Children in the city of Tabatinga and the Border that crosses it<sup>11</sup>. What one saw was the exuberance of carefully cultivated youth and gender (beautiful) embodiments, the fertility of socialities and libidinal economies in the “beginning of Brazil” [Brazil Army announcement in Tabatinga] or in the “asshole of the World” [as many foreigners say], in the multidimensional voluptuousness of the Amazon forest-over-there, with its localized effect of superabundance. Nothing seems to be ruins and no latest sky appears to fall down over them. Not even during the health and political crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic in Amazon did the anguish of the End of the World reach the *terreiro* and its members.

However, abundance and exuberance co-exist with forms of precariousness and violence that coincide with descriptions of contemporary forms of racism, colonialism, capitalism, heteropatriarchy, etc. It is not maybe the End of the World, but a *reverse of The Nation* (Serje, 2005), and the social-pedagogical latency of *abjection* and killability (Butler, 2020 [1993]; 1993; Silva, 2019). It is also the consistent threat of the end of certain bodies and worlds.

All of Pai Jairo’s gay and trans- sons and daughters of saint come from poor families, from Amazonian *cabocla* groups in the terms of the colonial genealogies of Amazonian history (Melo & Olivar, 2019; Melo, 2020). Many were born in riverside communities and arrived in the city of Tabatinga and the “border” in childhood. Many have experiences of abandonment and uprootedness. The members of this network have very vivid and repeated experiences of murder, rape, beatings, and humiliation by military, police, or religious (Christian, Pentecostal) agents. All of them remember – and some closely observed – the death, rape and torture of acquaintances. Several went through intense situations of violence, sometimes related to their experiences of gender and sexuality; sometimes at the hands of relatives; sometimes related to their religious activities; sometimes related to the cross-border dynamics of drug trafficking (Paiva, 2016, 2019; Freitas and Olivar, 2022; Olivar, 2022). Many of them, especially the trans- (transwomen and *travestis*) members of the group, have left school and experience constant situations of unemployment. Occasionally, they find that housing and food are difficult to come by.

This network is also marked by the historical moment locally known as “the death of the macumbeiros”: an almost complete local disappearance of macumba<sup>12</sup> (a specific threat of the end of a world) (Silva, 2015). This event involved the murder of Pai Luiz (Pai Jairo’s first mentor) and Pai Betinho in the mid-1990s. According to Silva (2015: 116-119), these murders spread an immobilizing sense of fear among Father Luiz Macumbeiro’s more than 30 children of saints, many of whom were also threatened<sup>13</sup>. In the network of Pai Jairo and His Children, the idea of the *end* is not associated with the World, but with the permanent feeling that macumba (a world) can disappear, and also as an effect of the processes of Amazonian frontiers (Silva, 2015: 119). This is the “land of sin” for the afro-indigenous entities (Silva, 2015: 62, 111), in a perspective in which the World also exists as a threat to/within the spiritual world.

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of the World (as we know it)? And how to not be killed today?

11 There is no place in this article for a “contextualization” of the city and the border. For more information and other descriptions, see: Zárata (2008); Aponte-Motta 2017); Victorino (2012); Paiva (2016, 2019); Olivar (2014, 2015, 2017, 2019a); Melo and Olivar (2019). Regarding this triple border in terms of gender and homosexualities, see Moreno Rangel (2020) and Nascimento (2018, 2019).

12 The names “batuque” and “macumba” are part of the popular repertoire for these religions and spiritualities. Cardoso Zikán (2007), explains how the term “macumba” is politically and academically discredited and may be understood as a pejorative or accusatory term. It still maintains positive connotations in many Afro-Brazilian religious environments, however.

13 The story of the murders of the Pais de Santo was (almost) renewed in 2018, when a powerful Mãe de Santo, well-known and a relative of Pai Jairo’s saint, suffered an attack in which a young transgender woman who was accompanying her ended up dead, abandoned on the street, and institutionally treated as indigent. In 2016, for example, there were 4 terreiros, according to information collected via WhatsApp with Samara. By contrast, in July 2021 only the terreiro of Pai Jairo was still operating in the city.

As the entity Mr. Zé Malandro explained to researcher Reginaldo Silva:

... [A]t that time they didn't say *macumbeiro* or anything. They talked about healers and as there also were the Indians, both the Ticuna and the people from Peru. They prayed with leaves and things and people started to believe in it. When more civilization arrived -- the doctors, the white people's businesses -- then the people started trusting those things more and left it aside. It was like the people -- Catholicism itself -- were already judging "They are sorcerers; those things there are demons". Society was closed to that, so they had to unite to be able to found their own religion that today has both Umbanda and Mina. (Silva, 2015: 119)

When enacted by the forces of drug trafficking, police, and armies, or churches of Christ as an effect of *Amazon Border processes* (Grimson, 2003) and "Development", Tabatinga and the Border would become compositions of the World-as-Threat (WfT).

On the other hand, the *border*, in its lower-case form, is also a space built by many as a space for sexual and gender "freedoms" and new arrangements (Olivar, 2022). A territory of escape and of multiple forms of care (Olivar, 2019a, 2019b). And the State is also an externality, an always recent mistrust and the attractive state of the desirable bodies (in the sense made famous by Tom of Finland) in the police and military corps (federal, in special), with the "money" necessary for "honey", or for a wedding, making kinship and populate the nation; the bodies of children, guardianship council members, and friendly teachers (Olivar, 2014, 2016). It is gender and the State (and sexuality) making up one another (Vianna & Lowenkron, 2017), the region, the w/World(s), and its ends.

Following the lives, politics, and poetics of *travestis*, in Afro-Brazilian matrix religions is very important (Pereira, 2017). Pereira (2018) affirms that they "construct sophisticated forms of agency to deal with their exclusion from the power that establishes categories of what can and cannot enter into the world of the possible, and that designates their bodies and their subjectivities as unthinkable". Thus, Pereira (2018) follows, "Perhaps the path forward is to enchant ourselves with the multiplicity of agents and their inaudible forms of agency, with the creativity of their poetics". Pushing towards this sophisticated agency and enchantment, I am interested in showing the emergence of a *world for us* (wf#) illuminated by the *blacklight* (Silva, 2019) of Umbanda entities' closed or whitened eyes, by the laboriously produced beauty, multiplicity and solidity of bodies, relationships and the *terreiro* itself.

### **Macumba, Batuque, Umbanda, religion**

In my fieldnotes for the night of September 7th, 2011, I noted that Emilly, a girl who was "underage", a "Mermaid" and "a whore on the avenue", born and raised as a riverside boy, only spoke to me about two things: Religion ("Batuque") and "Malas" ("packages". Aka penises).

*When we talk about cocks, she happily talks about sizes, experiences... of liking "big packages"... of fucking those who have them for free... of how one has to pretend when the cock's small and how a small package, misused, can hurt more than a large one... of how she'll give a blowjob without a condom when the package looks good and smells nice and such... Clinging to her cell phone all the time, looking, searching, listening to music or checking to see if someone had called... [WhatsApp and smartphones had still not made it to Tabatinga, and the internet was not widely available] . Suddenly someone called: that night there would be work at the terreiro.... Emilly is a member of the Batuque and in Tabatinga there are 3 terreiros... she attends one of them. "There I dress as a man." And then the conversation, which included Wallder and Geni, strayed off without me being able to understand much of it....*

Of these two things, it was the “malas” (sex, gender-plus-sexual constructions, money, the night, the bitching, the “cruising”) that mattered most to me at first. I paid little attention in 2011 to the issues associated with “Batuque”.

In September 2012, in the context of the Gay Pride events, I met Jairo (23 years old), organizing a part of the celebration and, at night, riding the beautiful Hannah during the Parade, dancing and twerking euphorically all the way to the ground. Weeks later I attended, for the first time in fieldwork -- and in my life -- an Umbanda ceremony.

Before going forward with a description of this initial context, it is important to stop and briefly ponder Umbanda. As I am not attempting to “explain” what this religion is<sup>14</sup>, I will make a leap forward time to present some elements of it, as presented by the teachings that Pai Edinho gave me in Manaus in 2015 on our return from Tabatinga<sup>15</sup>.

Pai Edinho explained to me that Umbanda is an organizational device (derived from Candomblé and strong indigenous roots); an institutionalization of forces, energy, spirits, and mediumistic abilities that are prior to any religion or technique. These forces, energies, and capabilities are extremely present and available in the Amazon, as in other regions, he explains. These *Afroindigenous relationships* (Goldman, 2021), especially those of welcoming, strengthening, and healing, offer up resistance in the face of “oppression” and “humiliation”.

At a time of life that... in Brazilian society, if you weren't white, you didn't have a family, you didn't have status, you weren't part society. So, a lot was oppressive, right? Humiliating. And it was people like us discovering that they had strength, that they had energy, that they had spirit, that they had...

For Pai Edinho, there is a full (virtual and current) disposition of Umbanda that welcomes *difference* as difference and as something not to be *civilized*. This is how *terreiros* such as that of Pai Jairo have enormous capacity to welcome young gay and trans people (whores and grifters, including young people with serious health problems and/or who suffer from drug abuse). Not for spiritual reasons (particular “gay” connections with spirits or mediumistic abilities), but for “social context, really”. For Pai Edinho, “homosexuality is a search for freedom of spirit, for a more adventurous, more spontaneous person. Not every religion accepts this spontaneity.”<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, Umbanda, establishes a very precise sense of “development” and organization. It implies total attention to the growth processes of young people and a form of guidance. Guiding, strengthening, listening; following all the complex religious rituals, getting involved in a series of obligations, take hold, and develop. The spirits “also incite one to learn. They also must have permission for that. On top of that medium, mainly. Not every spirit comes and does what it wants.”

All this takes place in a not always clear balance or back-and-forth between organization (discipline, hierarchy, division), care, and an ethics based on respect (and not on tolerance or obedience<sup>17</sup>). “Spirituality is very individual. It is intense, immense, irregular, but it does not cancel out individuality”.

14 As Banaggia (2008) and Chiesa (2012) have shown, Umbanda has strong regional and local variability, including from *terreiro* to *terreiro*. Drawing on the classic work by Ivonne Maggie, Chiesa (2012) identifies a key role of the house leader in the emergence of these differences “which results in doctrinal and ritualistic differentiation between one house and another” (pg 211). “This process of constant differentiation that makes Umbanda a religion in movement” derives from the individual creative investments, syntheses, and conflicts to which the Umbanda *terreiro* seems to be always open (Chiesa, 2012: 212). In our case, it is necessary to focus on the efficacy of collective work, in a network that not only mobilizes the father and his children, but also collectives of entities, the materiality of the *terreiro*, the bodies, the clothes and objects of decoration and gift, the territory, etc.

15 By 2014 and 2015, Pai Edinho “had his hand on the head” of Pai Jairo. Pai Edinho had great respect for Jairo and was well aware of the networks, circuits, and expressions of the *terreiro* religions in Amazonas, including that in Tabatinga. Pai Jairo, at the main time of the fieldwork, was not a person who was in the habit of “explaining” and teaching religion discursively, much less to those who were not his son or daughter.

16 In this sense, please see Pereira (2018) for a reflection on gender, sexuality and politics in contemporary Brazil, paying attention to the Cristian “inclusive” religions, among the Afro-Brazilian's.

17 *Tolerance* is the modern sister of contempt, the open channel of civilizational unification, a cursed “metaethnocentrism”, as Goldman (2017) analyzes in dialogue with Stengers' (2018) cosmopolitical proposition. Its opposite, typical of Afro-indigenous knowledge (such as Umbanda), is *respect* (Goldman, 2017)..



Let's return to 2012, when Umbanda was increasingly important for the members of this network<sup>18</sup>. Without "his own" *terreiro*, the young Pai Jairo held his parties and ceremonies in other *terreiros*, especially in that of his ally and formative reference, Mãe Lúcia (Mother of the saint, too). With more than 30 years in the religion, she had been the daughter of Pai Luiz Macumbeiro. After his murder, she became the daughter of Pai Raimundo and, in this sense, she had a sibling relationship with Pai Jairo<sup>19</sup>.

Through the side of an old house in the central region of Tabatinga, I enter into a large patio with fruit trees, dirt floors, and plants. Behind the temple stands a strong wooden building, painted white with blue windows, well finished, clean, solid, and cared for. An established *terreiro*, with an abundance of images – some of them very old – displaying the marks and firmness of care and the passage of time. On its dirt floor, the sons and daughters of saints, separated into "men" and "women", were bare foot and dressed in white, beginning the ceremony. In front stood Jairo with his bell, next to the atabaque (large hand-played drum) opening the lines. There stood also Mãe Lucia and several other older women.

Girls like Emilly, Chris and her cousin Samara (trans(girls), in Samara's most recent term) were dressed in pants and t-shirts, hair tightly gathered in light-colored cloths, just like men and gays... 'Just like' is not a good term, however. Even "dressed as men", as Emilly told me, the clothing – all or some of it – was "women's", or aesthetically performing, in Butler terms (1990), femininity (clothes that were more fitted to women or modified in some way for women). I realized that Samara, whose chest was blooming in a hormonally manufactured adolescence, was even wearing a bra. It was one of the first images for thinking about their "truques" (tricks) as fractal devices of habitation, implication, and traversing worlds and normative imperatives (as that of gender in their own religion). The other women, the cis, wore loose, light skirts and "women's" blouses. Their hair was loose and decorated.

Gradually some of the worshippers began to receive the proximity and arrival of the entities, starting the incorporating process. I learned that this border is "a strong crossroads", as said a man who, arriving in Tabatinga and while still on the airplane, had felt the irradiation of Zé Pelintra. Reginaldo da Silva (2015) comments on the abundance of entities and possessions along this border. A multitude of entities inhabit this world-with-them, sharing the world in composition (Nobrega, 2019). I sat outside next to Wallder, looking in through the window. Wallder no longer liked to "receive" entities and that's why I didn't go in. Receiving was too strong for him: it knocked him down.

We see Chris receiving. Spasms come, someone holds her, helps with the turning, releases her head. Her hair spreads out in the night. She moans lightly but stays there, with her body slightly crouched, head down, as if she were an old woman. "Like a cabocla", says Wallder without knowing who is in Chris' head. Is it Jacira? Cris stayed stationary, bathed in sweat, her head bowed and her hair flowing loose in her white boy-girl clothes. Then someone passed a simple colored cloth -- their sword – over her and wrapped it around her torso, precariously evoking/turning into a dress for the entity who was trying to arrive. Jaciara, in Chris's body, kept the pace, marking the rhythm of the drums. She smiled when someone greeted her and summarily greeted them back. She looked calm but was almost immobile.

Mãe Lucia also received Cabocla Jurema, who remained seated in her chair. Then it was Samara's turn. Her long, strong hair twirled, twinkling with light, spreading moisture around her. Her laughter became louder.

18 Pereira (2017, 2018) argues for the special role that possession by Pomba-Giras has for Brazilian travesti processes of *montagem* (body making) and embodiment. My ethnography with Pai Jairo's network shows how this is of fundamental importance not only for *travestis*, but for everyone who experiments and needs to deal with their unconflicting gender/spiritual process. This is not only related to Pomba-Giras, but also to but Caboclas, Exus, and Sailors, which demand specific gender performances. Furthermore, this importance is not only for the *montagem* of the *travesti* body, but also for the emergence of force, network, sense and (as I am arguing here) a place to be (*terreiro*). The multiplicity of presences and physical-spiritual interactions, marked by gender, is a central point in this network of presences, places, people, and possessions.

19 Silva (2015), demonstrates the existence of three recent generations of "macumbeiros" in Tabatinga. The first is represented by Seu Luiz or Pai Luiz Macumbeiro, a former "macumbeiro" who was murdered in 1994, a time when macumba almost disappeared in Tabatinga. The second is represented by Mãe Lúcia, Pai Luiz' daughter of saints. The third generation is represented, and to some extent led, by Pai Jairo.

It was a big woman there! But the possession didn't last long. The entity was very new in this head and the possessed-body-head still wasn't firm enough for the entity to take over. This, at least, was the explanation given to me.

"All People of the Forest," said Walder at this city in the heart of the World's biggest (last) forest. The gyrations went on and the people received entities, tried to handle them, and then the entities let go. Then it began again. Cabocla Jurema continued to sit calmly in her chair, eyes wide open, attentive, and kind. Dona Herondina, firmly settled in Pai Jairo's head, commanded the house and the ceremony in her colorful dress decorated yellow flowers, made of simple cotton fabric.

The next day, Chris told me that the party had turned "left" afterwards, towards the people of the night and the street<sup>20</sup>. That's when an Exu came, "took over Quinho" [Quinho, one of the transwomen, today legally named Aline Tilinha], and came to collect some obligation in an outbreak of violence. It was afternoon in Tabatinga and Chris was very tired, exhausted, and feverish. She explains to me how strong this process is, how she must be much better prepared for it in the future, stronger. Two entities wanted to establish themselves in her head, but for a moment they were fighting. I had seen the first arrival of one of them. 2012. One went in, the other went out. Cabocla Jacira and Caboclo Sete Encruzilhadas, which "is very strong". Heavy. And Chris' head still doesn't know how to deal with it. Her body just wanted to fall. Cabocla Jacira arrived already drunk because she knows that, in Chris' head, she can't drink. "She's too new in my head, so She can't. It must have been drinking in Manaus or Bahia and from there came to try to establish herself." Strong, scary, but it's good. Caboclos, Exus, Pomba-giras, Indians, Sailors and Gypsies like to drink there, smoke there; Erezinhos come to crawl, jump, and run on all fours<sup>21</sup>. One must have a strong body to grow spiritually, to have a head-body capable of serving as a place for the entity to establish itself and also for it to grow. It is necessary to control the irradiation, the presence, and the possession of "the other", as they usually call upon an entity - mostly Exus and Pomba-Giras - whose proximity irradiates through the possessed and out of the ritual space. She can't just come whenever she wants, Chris explained to me in her bed, still glowing from the after-effects of possession by a seductive Pomba-Gira, her favorite<sup>22</sup>.

### **Pai Jairo's *terreiro* (w/f# barricade).**

The time of raw bodies was also the time when the network was at its most fragile depending on other people's *terreiros*. As Rabelo (2014: 280-1) shows, it is in the process of making, a process of hard work performed by several actors, that the saint and his children are strengthened and become agents and objects of care.

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20 Umbanda mobilizes a great number of entities organized in different lines, families, groups, ancestral origins, etc.. Names and configurations vary significantly. A basic division at Pai Jairo's *terreiro*, combined with gender, is left side (Pomba Giras, Exus, some Malandros) and right side entities (Caboclos, Índios, Sailors, "Forest People", Pretos Velhos, etc). Differently from another *terreiros* and going against normative expectations, in Pai Jairo's temple it is not uncommon to see the crossing of entities and lines (groups or families) during the same party or ceremony. This "uncontrolled" spiritual force implies much more energy and physical force for, among, and by the sons and daughters, as well as certain dangers and techniques of protection. As we shall see below, this is often used as an argument that the *terreiro* is "too young".

21 TN: The mischievous spirits of young children and babies.

22 Among the girls and some of the gays in the *terreiro*, Pomba-Giras are the favorite entities. There is no local agreement about Pomba-Giras having always been prostitutes. For Cardoso Zikán (2007), Hayes (2009), Pereira (2017), and Bahia (2020), this connection seems to be more-or-less constant or consistent, however. According to Pereira (2017), they "are the spirit of a woman who would have been a prostitute when alive; a woman capable of dominating men with her wiles" (153), and "the embodiment of transgressive femininity, with powers of revenge and care" (154). Bahia (2020) aims at a cross-analysis between the field of sex work and that of religion in Candomblé *terreiros* in Portugal and Blanchette & DaSilva (2018) explore this same intersection in Rio de Janeiro. Freitas and Olivar (2022) show how in Tabatinga, the Pomba-Giras are also those who have been violated and are capable of killing, and allow femininities to deal with enormous sexual, amorous, and economic conflicts and violence, in a similar way as shown by Birman for cis-women (2005).

Together with Rabelo, I somewhat follow what has been called the “material turn”, connecting social analysis of relationships and transformations with its materialities (such as “houses”, bodies, objects, etc).<sup>23</sup>

“(…) The *terreiro* [is] a space for coexistence that entangles its members (not only humans) in the making of each other, which produces certain modes of commitment and responsibility.” (Rabelo, 2014: 281). “*Travestis* seek spaces where they can dance in the houses of the saints, incorporating pomba-gira. After all, as Andrezza pointed out, ‘every *travesti*, every gay, has a pomba-gira, a Padilha’” (Pereira, 2017: 152). In our case, in 2012, the *terreiro* didn’t yet exist, so the entanglements of its members were in process before the *terreiro* began. In fact, the entanglements between worshippers, the father, and the many entities (not only pomba-gira) were what made the *terreiro* possible and imputed a need to keep bodies, networks, and spiritualities growing.

The first image I have of Pai Jairo’s *terreiro* is from 2013. It is the outskirts of Tabatinga, as he said, in a city’s recent area of urban sprawl. When the sidewalk ended, I descended a small ridge along something like a country path between the green grass and the thicket that was beginning to be cleaned out by a few of the area’s first inhabitants. I arrived there guided by Chris.

At the time, the separations between plots were just being invented, as marks cut in the grass, posts, and wires. The back access to Jairo’s land had no restrictions or obstacles. It was a plot of land about 10 meters wide by 30 meters deep. Of the future *terreiro*, there was only one small house of Exu at the back: small, red, made of wood. At first it didn’t even have a padlock. Few images were in Exu’s house, and some were stolen from there. In Tabatinga they were scarce and very expensive. From the grounds of the *terreiro* was 10 meters of cut grass to Jairo’s house, at the front of the plot. At the back of the house, on one side, a system of tanks and hoses served as a bathroom, laundry, and water tank. On the other side, there used to be a small pen for the animals Jairo kept: ducks, chicken and guinea pigs. We entered the house from the back through a wooden door. In 2013, Pai Jairo’s house had three rooms and was made of wood boards, canvas, and zinc sheets, along with some incipient masonry foundations.

Leaving through the house’s front door, Jairo’s land extended another four meters up to a road that was still being opened up as a main street. Beyond were bush and “federal lands” under the control of the Brazilian Army. Nearby, a stream of clean water. At the end of the hot afternoon, the mermaids, gays, misses, and goddesses gathered there in shorts, shirts, and flip-flops, weeding the grass, going into the bush to gather leaves for baths and medicine, sweeping, and smoking in peace.

At the age of 16, recognizing himself as homosexual, Jairo had entered into the life of “the saints”, guided by the emblematic “cartomancer” and “macumbeiro” Seu Luiz, *pai de santo* of the first movement or generational cycle of “macumba” in Tabatinga (Silva, 2015). He then spent some time in training in Manaus with his first mother of saints and then returned to Tabatinga. He quickly learned the work of spiritual mediation and, at the age of 18, in his Hanna-mode, he set up “a little stool” in his mother’s house to read tarot and guide clients in taking healing baths and other spellwork. A “religion researcher” is not defined as being a medium “by birth”, but as an effect of training, obligations, and study.

“Then you start taking shape and after a while you have a lot of clients”, says Jairo about his own growth. At the age of 21, when we met, Jairo was no longer a travesty and had almost 20 children of saints. The need to have a *terreiro* for this more-than-human network thus began to become urgent. “One day [in 2013] I talked to my entity (Dona Herondina): ‘My old lady, you’re going to get me a place, ma’am; a *terreiro* for me... or I’ll stop here”.

<sup>23</sup> I specifically follow the path of André Dumans Guedes (2017) in his dialogue with a certain anthropology that contemplates “the house” in its procedural, movement, relational, and material dimensions. I am interested in the path marked out by this author in the *fractal relations* between mobilities, movement, territories, and “home” in relationships among the Brazilian lower classes. In this sense, the work of Cavalcanti (2009) on the always incomplete transformation of shacks into houses is referential, as is the work of Rabelo (2014), cited in the body of the text. See Machado (2013), too, for his work on “houses”, bodies and kinship in the “batuque gaúcho”.

On the same afternoon in which he put the pressure in Dona Herondina, a client appeared at his stall. “Jairo, there’s a piece of land that I’m not even using’. Kid, it was 25, 30 thousand reais and I didn’t even have R\$100. She brought me here to see the land and told me ‘I’ll give it to you, you can stay...’ I thought it was kind of normal, but not so normal... I was very happy”. Jairo immediately went to “buy on credit” materials to build a squatter shed: some wooden planks, canvas, plastic, cardboard, tools. “I wanted to have my own experience of living alone...” He was 23 years old.

The next day a man appeared complaining. “Who ordered this place to be built...?? It has no title! This land is mine!!!!” There were then 18 or 19 families who, like Jairo, precariously occupied small plots of land. “Actually, it was an invasion, right?”

It was a Thursday. Intimidated, Jairo left the land. He was back on Friday, however: “if they are going to take it all down, I will be one more they have to take out”. It was the end of 2012. The entities said “Go...” But on the same day, at 1 pm, “the man” returned with documents and vehicles. “The policeman told me that I was prohibited from building... He threatened to take me to prison... I was alone. I went to consult the entities and they told me to build again. ‘This is our ground, it’s for us’”. Caboclos Sibamba, Pena Verde, and Dona Brava seemed completely ready and determined to do what they do from centuries: occupy the territory. For them it was necessary to have a “ground”. Thus, strengthened in his relationship with the entities, Jairo called the police station on Saturday and asked if so-and-so (the policeman who had threatened him) was on duty. “And there was no one, for three days!” Understanding that time was precious, he returned to the lot. “A lot of people came, including my father...” The idea was to quickly build something: “Just a roof... there was no light or water or anything... I took an old hammock, some rags and moved in.... When the man came back about three days later, I was already living there.... Then the man left... Other leaders from the invasion here gathered and sent messages to communicate that an invasion was going on, so it could grow... If there were 50 families it would be more difficult to get us out...”. “To be more”, “to be one more” has always been important in this collective endeavor of growth and strengthening.

Sometime later, a city judge appeared, bearing an eviction warrant for all the families. They had fifteen days to leave. “I went to the entities again. Many dismantled their houses; others took the furniture... The judge threatened to burn it down and bulldoze it.” Jairo remembers the Judge’s exact name, “because I had to do the work... Not to harm her, not against her... but simply to change her mind... Then we were all crying... everyone was worried...” Then Dona Cigana came: “I’m going to make a fuss and in 7 days she will withdraw the warrant... and it was every night that she worked in my head until 2 am... She ordered me to throw creolin and coarse salt all over the land [occupied by the invasion] and set all the macumbeiros to spinning, all over the land [this was just one night]...”. “We were dressed in white, running around and tossing about creolin and rock salt... and other things she put inside, which I don’t know...”. Within a week the eviction order was cancelled. Apparently, the man’s property ended up in court due to the accumulation of tax debts. The man never again claimed to own the land.

The materiality of the *terreiro* and the whole of the land managed by Pai Jairo is an important key to understanding these ways of growing and the effectiveness of the relationships constructed in and through the network. The *terreiro*’s temple was built in masonry and construction was a struggle: a huge job of managing money and relationships. “I had 40 children of saints... I said, each one will give 100 reais and we will start... and everyone gave.” One of his blood sisters, who lives in Manaus, sent 400 reais. But Jairo accounts show an investment of 15,000 reais in the construction of the *terreiro*’s temple. “Other people gave much more... And I used my macumba money, too... I called my clients in Manaus...” “If they wanted [the entities], they had to give us money”.

Whoever built it was a bricklayer. But it was sight to be seen, as Pai Jairo remember: “Samara in a skirt, in a little dress, carrying bricks... The sand arrives... she goes there with a basin of sand... all, *travestis*, men... all of them... they hauled sacks of cement...”. Then they had to remove the Exu and build a new house for him, also made of masonry, just over two meters high. This was built on the left side of the *terreiro* temple.

Finally, in October 2015, the *terreiro* was officially and publicly inaugurated, with the visit of Pai Edinho. The temple was already built entirely of masonry, with a gabled wooden structure for its zinc roof. No lining yet. The cold cement floor was painted dark red and the interior walls blue. The altar was made from shelves along the back wall and already housed a growing population of images. Sons and daughters covered the unlined roof with pieces of cloth were stretched and nailed to the beams for the Exu party that would welcome Pai Edinho. The temple had its rectangles opened to a front and a side window and to the doorway, but it was still without a door, without railings, and without finishings. Its outside was raw brick. Exu’s newly built house was a similar structure, with the front wall plastered and painted white and a green curtain acting as a door.

The lot was still open on all four sides and the space between the buildings was covered by grass and earth that, when it rained, turned into mudflats. The external walls of Pai Jairo’s house were now made of long, strong wooden slats painted a vivid green, set on a white-painted masonry foundation. It had wooden windows that closed with blue frames over the green. Inside, still without any covering, slats of wood painted a bright red separated the common area from the bedrooms. It was a colorful, well-kept house, with images of saints on the walls. It was collectively occupied and cared for, serving as a base for the preparation of food and bodies that would be offered at celebrations and also for the organization of the entities’ costumes.

Pai Edinho’s visit in 2015 was fundamental: it guaranteed Jairo’s 7-year “obligation” and his official status as a Pai de Santo while also making it possible to manufacture iron structures for offerings to exus and pombagiras and the laying of the *terreiro*’s foundations, right in the center of the temple. “And it’s not finished yet,” Pai Jairo told me in July 2016, when I celebrated his having put in PVC lining on the ceiling, as well as wooden doors and windows in the temple and in Exu’s house, now painted all in dark red. The facade of the temple was still in raw brick and the red floor was still made of cold cement, but now there was a frame in the middle that marked out the saints’ abode. Wooden doors had padlocks to protect the images. Jairo’s house, on the other hand, remained the same.

By 2016 the network had taken over the land in front of Pai Jairo’s house. They had cleared it and set up two wooden poles in order to build a volleyball court. In the house, the yard and the volleyball court, the girls, the trans, and the gays gathered for long and delicious hours of play, fun, parties and for hyper-realistic or fabulous conversations<sup>24</sup>; for work in the production of this world, for fights, Umbanda, macumba and, as Cris always said, “affect”.

When I returned in 2018 to start filming *Babado*, together with Camila and João, among my son León and her mother Márcia, the grass that covered the space between the *terreiro*’s temple and Pai Jairo’s house had begun to be replaced with cement. The temple floor was now ceramic. In front of an open-air water tank at the back of Jairo’s house, where everyone used to bathe, there was now two closed and stuffy modules constructed made of bricks that would perhaps one day become bathrooms. In addition, a brick wall was being built around Pai Jairo’s land, starting with the back and sides.

In January 2020, on the second visit to film *Babado*, the *terreiro* had become the Palácio da Dona Herondina. The high wall around the site was now closed in front, close to the street, still unpainted and unfinished, but with a gate, railing, skylights and five columns, each crowned with a “Turkish” dome. Ironwork fences in doors and windows were at the front and back of the property. All entrances to the land had been cut off and one could only enter through the main door and through Jairo’s house. My bucolic image of the open occupation had

<sup>24</sup> The film *Babado* deals with this fabled power that crosses children of saints and entities, streets and streets, and worlds (Freitas and Olivar, 2022). On the richness and narrative power of the “street people”, see the abundant work of Vânia Zikán Cardoso (2007, 2017).

been transformed into a closed palace and a protected ground for those who live there or who came through it. It was now a huge and respected *barricade* (Mombaça, 2021).

Finally, in 2021, Samara helped me remotely for a month, paid with FAPESP resources as a Research Assistant. During June and July, she sent me audios, photos and videos showing the temple, the grounds, Jairo's house and the Palace complex, including during her cousin Chris' 3-year obligation. Pai Jairo's house is now built entirely in masonry, with only the facade painted (a light purple) and a long bed of little plants growing next to the inner face of the side wall of the land. The temple is entirely painted white and all the windows of the temple and house are protected with bars. The ground between the buildings is still partially covered with cement and the inner walls of Exu's house are half covered in the same black ceramic tiles as the floor. The temple and house of Exu contain many more images and other ritual objects. There are lots of plants, especially Saint George's swords. With its outer walls painted in burnt yellow and dark brown, tints skylights and the five columns with their golden domes, the Palace of Dona Herondina now stands out from the neighboring houses, which remain more or less the same as they were before, as is the dirt/mud street running through the neighborhood.

### **“Minors”, to grow up, to be more...**

[The saint's daughter] sees a zone of contact and participation form between her and the saint, which often blurs the boundaries between one and the other; she learns to give up the agency on many occasions. (...) As a result of the intervention of many mediators and procedures, she experiences a path from which she can emerge strengthened and from which she can stand out as a focus for the care and strengthening of others. (Rabelo, 2014: 280)

My last argument here is that the metaphor of youth seems to be very important for this network (2011-2020), combining between being “youth”, “growing up”, and “being more”<sup>25</sup>. This was visible in some scenarios where linkages between “youth”, “growing up”, “being more” and the religious notion of “development” were significative.

In 2011, when I was very attentive to questions about “sexual exploitation” and “human trafficking”, Emilly told me that the discourse of “sexual exploitation” is something employed by the “old queers” of the NGO. She also told me that she was “a minor”. “But aren't you 18?”, I asked. “I am”. Emilly, like Walder -- the gay son of a former child counselor and a much older military man -- was aware of the multiple provocative connotations that such a statement has in the sex market and on its policies of control and regulation.

One afternoon in 2016, when we were preparing for a ceremony of Exu, a mother appeared and, furious, took her 15-year-old daughter (a cis woman) away. The young woman had intended to become a daughter of the saint of Pai Jairo. There is always a new generation entering the *terreiro*. The next day the girl returned and, together with Pai Jairo, they went to try to resolve the conflict with the mother. Jairo sought out information about the right to religious freedom and understood that such rights could be recognized for adolescents. He appealed to the Guardianship Council to confirm this and demanded the guarantee of his daughter (of saints') rights<sup>26</sup>. Several similar situations occur in the daily life of the *terreiro*, involving the youngest sons and daughters, including many, many “affective” receptions and care, in the context of sexual violence, family

25 There is a vast Brazilian literature revolving around what is imagined and administrated as “minor”, underage, youth. These analyses, related with gender, sexuality and rights, used to pay special attention on the public policies and the State. See, for example, the works of Vianna (2002), Gregori (1997), more recently and with special attention to gender and sexuality assemblages of young girls, Fernandes (2017).

26 See Leite (2019) for a better understanding of “underage minors” and children as resources for controversies by conservative Christian political agencies in contemporary Brazil.

beatings, helplessness, loneliness, problematic drug use, and problems with the sexual market (Freitas and Olivar, 2022)<sup>27</sup>.

The importance and the clashes of youth are multiple and also develop within the religion itself. “Too young and too gay”, was part of the arguments that Pai Edinho had given me to explain his impatience with his son of saints and with the way he managed his *terreiro*. Like Pai Edinho, Ivan, other interlocutor (in their 40s) with whom I spoke, great expert and a Afro-Brazilian religious authority, criticized or misunderstood Pai Jairo and his children practices. What was on focus was a certain consistent and excessive “youthful” and “gay” attitude of crossing borders, in terms of gender (the latent girlishness of the transwomen girl and some gays when choosing clothes for their rituals), in terms of sexual practices (prohibited within a given family of saints), in terms of the uses of the *terreiro* (which should strictly be a temple and not a shelter), and finally in physio-cosmological terms: particularly the consumption of beverages within the grounds of the temple. In Ivan’s understanding, in the connection between the somewhat problematic youth involved in the spiritual administration of the *terreiro* with his cosmological perception of this cross-border space (as I mentioned above in note 20), there is a critical intersection with the abundant but “uncontrolled” presence and transit of entities from various lines or groups.

However, abundance, youth and growing up enable important practices of cosmopolitical and more-horizontal care – including legal protection – based on practices of autonomy and respect of their differences. “We need to be more”, said Pai Jairo, explaining how to deal with certain emblematic problems in the *terreiro*. “Being more” on the street (more and stronger people) and in the “head” (more stronger and better established entities). “Being more” in order to enter the Parish Church in masse, with colorful ceremonial clothes, for the celebration of Lent in 2015 and 2016; or “being more” at a public debate on religious freedom at the State University of Amazonas, full of evangelical pastors; or when, in 2016, Mother Lucia’s right to have her *terreiro* and to make her ceremonies needed to be defended against the abusive attacks of a hotel owner allied with a Civil Police delegate.

Finally, they became more. If in 2012 Chris didn’t have the knowledge, the body, or the spiritual development to host Dona Jacira, in 2016 or 2018, she was-with a constellation of at least 8 male and female entities that she used to receive, with three – Dama da Noite, D. Cabocla, and The Sailor -- the ones she most often received and with whom she does her spiritual works for clients. The raw bodies, almost immobile with their newborn entities weighing too much and their improvised “swords” made with simple fabrics, were three years later replaced with a splendid new spectacle. Bigger, stronger bodies that, in the afternoon, after work or a hangover, prepare the entire ritual, clean the lot, make the meals, and prepare the temple. As evening falls, they prepare their bodies for the party. The house is full of people and food, offerings, and potent smells. A choreographic constellation of strong and sumptuous entities, pampered with jewels, perfumes, and clothes made of varied fabrics, bright and sewn with care. Elegant *caboclas* with hats and long dresses, with ever better-defined healing and consultation powers. Divine pomba-giras with loud laughs, the favorites of the *babado* girls, happily chatter, smoke, and drink sparkling wine. They spin around, lifting the colorful layers of their radiant skirts and then sit under the Tabatinga night sky to listen to and advise clients and visitors.

And in the middle of it all sits a “made” Father of Saints, now with grandchildren and granddaughters of saints in Tabatinga and other near cities, always attending to a new generation coming in and through the *terreiro* and that, apparently, in 2021 resists in the Palácio da Dona Herondina as the most well-known house of “religion” in the city. This is a barricade.

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27 Pereira (2017), Souza et al (2014) have ethnographic data showing how the *terreiros* and the Afro-Brazilian religious temples are important for *travestis* to find care, housing, affect, and new forms of kinship and worlding.

To grow is to make more and better space (body-*terreiro*-network) for the entities and for the world-with-them (wf#). It implies a policy of care and obligations, of study and knowledge, of responsibility towards the *terreiro*, the network and religion, of bodily protections that *must* be fulfilled... In this growing in religion while growing in life, the paths of growth, which are marked by individual trajectories, differentiation, mobilities and achievements, shape the particular form of the Umbanda of Pai Jairo and His Children. Growing up, “be in development”, in the style of Butler’s (1990) ontology of gerunds, is a kind of intensive counter-precariousness in relation to difference, abjection, youth, sexuality, and gender.

## Final considerations

This paper advances our understanding of the ways in which people who are abject, threatened, and violated by the Amazonian “border processes” (Grimson, 2003), a particular end for different worlds (Kopenawa and Albert, 2015), make possible and flourishing lives. It is grounded in the comprehension of how the network of *Pai Jairo and His Children*, crossed by and crossing the World as Threat (WfT), make, manufacture, compose a world for them (wf#) that finds its grammar in macumba (Umbanda, “religion”, “batuque”), while they become more to bring on the World as struggle (W/s) [WfT>>wf#<<W/s].

I have dealt with the particular experience of this network and its macumba from its emic ideas of growth, youth, and being more, which have in the construction and fortification of the *terreiro* (the Palacio da Dona Herondina) an actual hub for enacting the World as a pluriverse or as a composite assemblage (Nóbrega, 2019).

Umbanda responds to humiliation (trans)historically, as it was explained by Pai Edinho. It organizes abundant forces that do not depend on history or the State, but which have their contrasting existence in them. Walking around with Chris, Sam, and others through the Tabatinga nights, I don’t “see” the End of the World, and maybe they don’t either. They never seem especially concerned with global politics. But in addition to their own experiences of violence and abjection, the entities-with-them know these endings and have inhabited them for centuries. The end was always there... and so were the stories about how to deal with it, how to face it. As a grammar, as a genealogic, oral and embodied knowledge, Umbanda provides senses, people, and practices that enables the existence of worlds threatened by flattening (Stengers, 2018) and destruction as effect of the colonial and bordering processes. In this sense, the radical engagement of my interlocutors with Umbanda has been implied the (cosmopolitical) multiplication of the world. A world with so much knowledge to be learned, with stories of colonization and slavery, prostitution and masculine violence emerging from their mouths every day, with forces and relationships coming from Turkey, Africa, Bahia or Rio de Janeiro.

This *world-for-us* [wf#] is a localized relationship of stubbornness, creativity, differentiation, and seduction with a World that marks the relationship of asymmetrical exteriority: “civilization, doctors, white businesses, society”, murder, torture, rape, expulsion, humiliation. A *world-for-us* is not an abstraction nor a retreat from the World. The world built with and from the *terreiro* is not a parallel satellite, nor is it a closed community systematically organized against the World, the State, or “Whites,” even though ethnic, gender, class, counter-State, and decolonial enunciations circulate among entities and worshippers. It is a device for participation in the active composition of a World. To inhabit the World as a struggle, and not just as a threat, is the disjunctive condition of vitality and creation for (and from the perspective of) the network of Pai Jairo and His Children. In this active composition of possibilities, a *barricade-for-us* is fundamental.

For Pai Edinho, in his 2015 explanations, “inside a *terreiro*, you have an open door to everything. It is a **neutral** zone.” Neutral is not peaceful, neutral is not wisely led (not least because it is about growing, learning, and developing), neutral is not free from conflicts. Neutral, as an open door to everything, can be connected to the *cosmos* of Stengers (2018: 447): “the unknown that constitutes these multiple, divergent worlds, connections of which they might be capable, against the temptation of a peace that would be final...”.



A dynamic between openness and organization (“division”), care and respect, mark the possibility of this “neutral zone”, as if it were a kind of *cabocla*, “gay”, and juvenile variation of what has been called *acuir lombamento*<sup>28</sup> in other Brazils.

The possibility of persistence and flourishing lies in the solidity of the Palace which ensures that *we are not killed now* (Mombaça, 2021), as well as in its formative conditions of growth and endurance in the world despite abjectifications and threats. This *terreiro* is the crossing of the bush, the waters, the night, and the cosmopolitical street: it is the multidimensional transborder space between them all. It enables the formative and pleasant encounter with “the other” street people, from the streets and nights of the past or beyond; the *caboclos*, the sailors that have gone but who come to co-exists with and duplicate the streets, the nights, the rivers, the forest of the here and now.

In the midst of globally-disputed Amazon and the economic precariousness, sometimes in direct opposition to experiences of death and violence, in the occupied periphery of the nation`s reverse in catastrophic times for the World, the “twinkling mirrors” of Rosa Caveira’s full skirts stand out in the Palácio da Dona Herondina. The intoxicating and delicious perfume of the Lady of the Night, the silky and luminescent skin and the red mouth of Maria Padilha, the shiny black and red of the cape of Tatá Caveira, the undeniable forcefulness of *índia Brava*’s bare feet, or the imposing headdress of Seu Tupinambá all shine. Beautiful and strong bodies-worshippers-entities engage in the process of relational reterritorialization: having a house, a network, a family. The party, the beauty, the ceremony, the growth, the friendship, the intensive fabulation, such as the bodies, the “floor” and the bricks, are for the Pai Jairo and his network constitutive forces of their module of habitability called (too young and too gay) *macumba*. As Christielly always says, what they find there is “affect”.

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<sup>28</sup> In his classic work Abdias Nascimento (1980) proposed an ABC for Quilombismo. Caring is the word for C. “Taking care in organizing our struggle for ourselves is an imperative for our survival as a people” (p.269). In this sense, amplifying the possibilities of political and analytical articulation closer to our case study, it is important to associate Tatiana Nascimento’s concept of *Cuírlombo* (2018), in its dual function: to resist and to organize. Despite the awareness of the *terreiro* as a place of refuge and care, despite the *caboclo* (and therefore afro-indigenous) ethno-racial belongings, and the repeated occasions when entities like *Índia Brava* insist on denouncing the pains of colonization, I have never heard Pai Jairo or his children associate their *terreiro* with the idea of the *Quilombo*, much less the *Cuírlombo*. Analytically, historically, and sociologically, however, these could be close and connected materializations of the management of worlds and barricades.

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# The survival of those who couldn't “stay home”: Community-based resistance and precariousness around the “new normal” in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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## **Abstract**

The Covid-19 pandemic deepened social inequalities in Brazil's favelas. Among certain social groups, the need to keep moving to ensure survival meant greater exposure to the risks of the disease. While kinetic elites enjoyed the privilege of remaining immobile and protected, less privileged urban groups were forced to continue in movement despite the risks created by the pandemic. In this study we qualify social analyses around the so-called “new normal” based on ethnographic research conducted in urban peripheries. Empirically based on the cases of the favelas Santa Marta and Vila Vintém, we examine conditioning factors that differentiate the effects of the pandemic among favelas in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Our intent is to demonstrate the differential effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in territories where the city's most impoverished population lacks the socioeconomic conditions to “stay home”. We indicate two general aspects: first, the pandemic deepened and re-signified pre-existing social problems; second, the shortage of public policies and complex requalifications of precariousness stimulated the development of various community-based actions to mitigate the risks of infection in these territories.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 pandemic; favelas; social inequalities; community-based mobilizations; urban violence.

# A sobrevivência dos que não puderam “ficar em casa”:

## Resistência comunitária e precariedades ao redor do “novo normal” em favelas do Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

### Resumo

A pandemia de Covid-19 agravou desigualdades sociais em relação às favelas no Brasil. Entre certos grupos sociais, a necessidade de se manter em movimento para garantir a sobrevivência significou maior exposição aos riscos da doença. Enquanto as elites cinéticas desfrutavam do privilégio de permanecer imóveis e protegidas, grupos urbanos menos privilegiados foram forçados a continuar em movimento apesar dos riscos da pandemia. Neste trabalho, qualificamos análises sociais ao redor do chamado “novo normal” a partir de pesquisas etnográficas realizadas em periferias urbanas. Empiricamente com base nos casos das favelas Santa Marta e Vila Vintém, examinamos os fatores condicionantes que diferenciam os efeitos da pandemia entre as favelas da cidade do Rio de Janeiro. Nossa intenção é demonstrar os efeitos diferenciais da pandemia de Covid-19 em territórios onde a população mais empobrecida da cidade carece de condições socioeconômicas para “ficar em casa”. Indicamos dois aspectos gerais: primeiro, a pandemia aprofundou e ressignificou problemas sociais preexistentes; segundo, em meio à escassez de políticas públicas e complexas requalificações de precariedades, estimulou o desenvolvimento de diversas ações de base comunitária para mitigar os riscos de infecção nesses territórios.

**Palavras-chave:** pandemia de Covid-19; favelas; desigualdades sociais; mobilizações comunitárias; violência urbana.

# The survival of those who couldn't “stay home”: Community-based resistance and precariousness around the “new normal” in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil<sup>1</sup>

*Apoena Mano; Jonathan Willian Bazoni da Motta*

## Introduction

When the Covid-19 pandemic arrived in Brazil, the expression “stay home” gained collective justification as it aligned with global epidemiological guidelines (WHO, 2020). Subsequently, different strategies emerged around these public health orientations for social distancing to prevent sharp increases in infection rates of the new viral disease. Reducing the number of bodies circulating would mitigate transmission of the disease in Brazilian cities (Fiocruz, 2020).

In March of 2020, the state government and the mayor of the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, began to implement social distancing policies. However, while the pandemic was intensifying in the country with sharp increases in the numbers of infections and deaths, it was also apparent that there was a problem of government. No reliable federal guidance about public health policies was provided to control the pandemic in the cities. Specialists affirm that former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro exploited the political instability brought by the pandemic to promote an escalation of his neoliberal authoritarianism – by adopting a “strategic ignorance” instead of undertaking political efforts to reduce the impacts of the pandemic (Ortega & Orsini, 2020).

Public debates in Brazil were marked by a dispute between supporters of this irresponsible denialism, and other groups advocating the need to adopt a new way of life during the indeterminate period of the pandemic. For those who decided to “stay home”, there was an adaptation to a “new normal”.

Social analysts in Brazil have characterized this new normality as the “creation of a new standard that provides people a certain protection, security, continuity, and, therefore, survival” (Insper, 2020). However, while some social groups had the privilege to debate the need to “stay home”, for many other people this wasn't possible. What would the “new normal” be like for subjects who did not have the socioeconomic means to “stay home”?

The theoretical-methodological framework of the “mobilities turn” allows the understanding that the power to choose whether to move about or remain immobile is a determinant of social inequalities (Büscher & Urry, 2009; Sheller, 2018; Adey et al., 2021). We focus our heuristic attention on the Brazilian specificities of a pandemic situation primarily found in the so-called Global South, in cities such as New Delhi, São Paulo, Jakarta, and Johannesburg (Bhan et al., 2020). While “kinetic elites” enjoyed the privilege of remaining immobile

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and protected, less privileged urban groups were “forced to move along polluted roads, inside packed public transportation, while facing high risks of infection” (Freire-Medeiros & Lages 2020: 136) to provide services deemed as “essential”<sup>2</sup>.

The case of the first Covid-19 victim in the greater Rio de Janeiro area highlights the interplay of gender, race, and class privilege in Brazil during the pandemic (Góes, 2022). This victim was a 63-year-old, non-white woman. She used to commute 120km by bus every week - from her home in Miguel Pereira, a municipality in the southern part of the state, to her workplace in Leblon, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the state capital. She was a domestic worker and was infected by the apartment owner, a woman who had returned from a trip to Italy – a country where an uncontrolled infection rate was already rampant. The Leblon resident quickly recovered from the illness, while the victim, Cleonice Gonçalves, tragically died on March 17, 2020 (ANPOCS, 2020).

This situation exemplifies a socioeconomic dynamic: the pandemic deepened social inequalities afflicting the impoverished populations in Brazil. The context is even more complex considering territories with specific features. For the populations living in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, the virus became a new concern that combined with previous problems - such as the scarcity of water, electricity, and sewage services in households.

However, variations among these territories should be analytical highlighted. Investigations about social inequalities in Brazil should not overlook the internal composition of the favelas in the national territory<sup>3</sup> (Valladares, 2005; Machado da Silva, 2016). In this regard, Rio de Janeiro can be approached as a privileged empirical territory for critical analyses of the urban space<sup>4</sup> (Perlman, 1979; Fischer, 2008; Larkins, 2015).

Drawing from urban sociology and anthropological research, our objective in this article is to examine the varying impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on two different favelas in Rio. Our analysis reveals that the pandemic has exacerbated and transformed pre-existing issues, while also producing the emergence of community-driven initiatives to address insufficient public policies and requalifications of precariousness. This dynamic is exemplified by the experiences of residents in the favelas of Santa Marta and Vila Vintém.

This article builds on research dialogues maintained by both researchers since 2015 (Mano, 2020, 2021; Da Motta, 2019, 2020). Our aim is to establish a comparative perspective (Giraudy et al., 2019) based on connections between community-based actions and government rationalities during the Covid-19 pandemic in Rio de Janeiro. Our methodology involves ethnographic analysis of different “social situations” (Gluckman, 1940; Van Velsen, 1979), based on long-term participant observation of everyday-life – conducted by attending community meetings, local events, and spaces of sociability, and by interviewing local residents and community leaders. Previously established relationships made it possible during the pandemic to use the digital environment as a place for participation, rather than just observation (Segata, 2020).

We perceive ethnography as an epistemic principle that productively confronts the researchers’ accumulated theoretical perspectives with the worldview of the interlocutors (Peirano, 1994; Favrat-Saada, 2005; Goldman, 2006, Nader, 2011). Through the “testimonies” (Das, 2011) of local residents we seek to highlight conditions that differentiate the effects of the pandemic in Rio de Janeiro favelas. We are guided by the argument that previous

2 During the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil, the government defined “essential services” as crucial activities for the provision of basic needs to the population. These services included healthcare, public safety, food production and distribution, energy, water, sanitation, transportation, logistics, and financial and communication services. However, workers in these essential services were at a higher risk of exposure to the virus - especially those in low-paying jobs and with limited access to Personal Protective Equipment and healthcare.

3 According to data from IBGE (2020), the number of occupied households in favelas in Brazil reached 5.12 million in 2019. Over nine years, this number had increased by 59%. An estimated 734 Brazilian municipalities, or 13.2%, have favelas. It is estimated that the total number of areas of this type reached 13,151, more than double the amount verified ten years ago (6,329).

4 The state of Rio de Janeiro is that with the second most households in favelas, approximately 717.3 thousand homes. Proportionally, the state is in 5<sup>th</sup> place, with 12.63% of its homes in favelas. Rio de Janeiro is the only state in Southeast Brazil with over 10% of the population living in favelas. The state capital, in turn, has 453.5 thousand households in favelas, which represents 19.3% of the total number of residences in the city.

forms of urban governance and territorial ordering conditioned differential impacts of the pandemic, largely due to the power relations and networks established in the territories (Fleury & Menezes, 2020). By adopting this framework, we hope to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the impacts of the pandemic and its effects on urban space.

In the following section, we provide an overview of the sociopolitical urban context of Rio de Janeiro in recent years. Proposing the concept of *differential regimes of precariousness*, we discuss how the pandemic has aggravated previous survival conditions in the city's favelas. We then explore ethnographical descriptions to illustrate how the reactions to the risks of infection were articulated in two different favelas of the city. Our concluding remarks return to a broader debate regarding the differential impacts of Covid-19 – and we establish a critique of what has been referred to as the “new normal”.

### **Precariousness, urban inequalities, and the pandemic in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil**

In this study, we argue that the Covid-19 pandemic amplified and transformed sociopolitical issues previously existing in the history of the city of Rio de Janeiro. To fully grasp a comprehensive understanding of this analysis, it is necessary to consider the recent context of urban production surrounding the favelas and their populations.

In recent decades, one of the most debated public policies executed in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro was the Pacifying Police Units (UPP) – which established a permanent presence of military police agents in these territories (Leite, 2017; Menezes & Correa, 2018). Launched in 2008, it can be affirmed that the program's purpose was to deconstruct the social imaginaries of a “violent city” by adapting the city to international security standards (Freire-Medeiros et al., 2013). This policy emerged with the inclusion of the city of Rio in the calendar of global mega-sporting events – including the 2007 Pan American Games, the 2014 Soccer World Cup, and the 2016 Summer Olympic Games (Sánchez & Broudehoux, 2013; Müller & Gaffney, 2018).

Despite the installation of 38 UPPs among the 763 favelas of the city, the program was based on replacing the long-standing brutal police repression of these urban territories with a “militarized tutelage” of these populations (Pacheco de Oliveira, 2014). Mega-events and militarization were mutually reinforcing, and the two phenomena were linked by social, economic, and political dynamics at various scales (Davies, 2017; Farias et al, 2018; Rocha & Da Motta, 2020).<sup>5</sup>

When the cycle of sporting events concluded and the project for an Olympic city was terminated, many discourses about financial and political crisis started shaping the production of the social reality in Rio de Janeiro. Around 2016, as the UPPs lost strength, armed conflict between state agents and drug cartels became not just another repressive resource, but the leading institutional policy. The idea of “urban war” became institutionalized as state policy (Barros & Farias, 2017; Grillo, 2019, Magalhães, 2020).

Since the “pacification” process has also objectively affected non-pacified territories (Da Motta, 2019), the plurality of regulatory forms and agencies impacted multiple favelas across the city in distinctive ways. Analyzing the context of urban transformations impacted by these governance strategies, sociologist Márcia Leite argued that the combination of state and market in the implementation of social development in specific favelas in the city has generated different forms of regulating these populations. Through the perspective of “territorial regimes” (Leite, 2014, 2017), she emphasized the profound territorial heterogeneity among the favelas - based on different adjustments, negotiations, resistances, and conflicts around the UPPs.

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<sup>5</sup> We understand militarization as a dispositif/apparatus (in the Foucauldian sense) that combines military-type actions (carried out not only by military agents) with the dissemination of a security doctrine that reorders social life, transforming all spaces into potential “battlefields” and all types of insurgency into security threats (Rocha and da Motta, 2020).

Considering the sociopolitical composition of “precarious lives”, it is possible to recognize rationalities that “frame” certain contemporary populations as societal threats. Depending on the sociopolitical context and its intersectionalities, life has different scales of valuation because certain subjects are often denied access to resources, opportunities, and protections that would make their existence more secure. Relegated to a condition of “precarious life”, certain social groups are “politically induced” into disabled support networks and differentially exposed to inequalities based on violations, violence, and premature death (Butler, 2015; Fassin, 2018). Recognizing the precariousness of certain lives is important for understanding how power and public governance operate in society.

Therefore, we can affirm that in recent years, subjects living in favelas in Rio de Janeiro have faced an intensified precariousness in their lives. This is because the state – which should protect these lives – has developed more sophisticated policies in forms of warfare, which intensify risks to these populations. Considering the police violence that has continued through different modulations during recent urban processes in Rio, statistical data indicate a racist logic behind public policies. For example, a study conducted by the *Rede de Observatórios da Segurança* highlights that 86% of the victims of police actions in the state of Rio de Janeiro in 2020 were Black, although this group represents only 51.7% of the population (Ramos et al., 2021).

Necropolitics refers to a political framework in which the concept of death serves as a guiding principle for governance (Mbembe, 2016). This theory helps to examine how the rationalities and policies of certain governments prioritize certain lives over others – and how the ultimate outcome of these decisions is often a disregard for human life. Within the context of Rio de Janeiro and Brazil, necropolitical practices are primarily informed by a racist logic that disproportionately impacts historically marginalized populations. This can be observed through an analysis of police actions, as previously noted, and also in the federal government’s rationality towards the Covid-19 pandemic. A study by Oliveira et al. (2020), illustrates this argument.

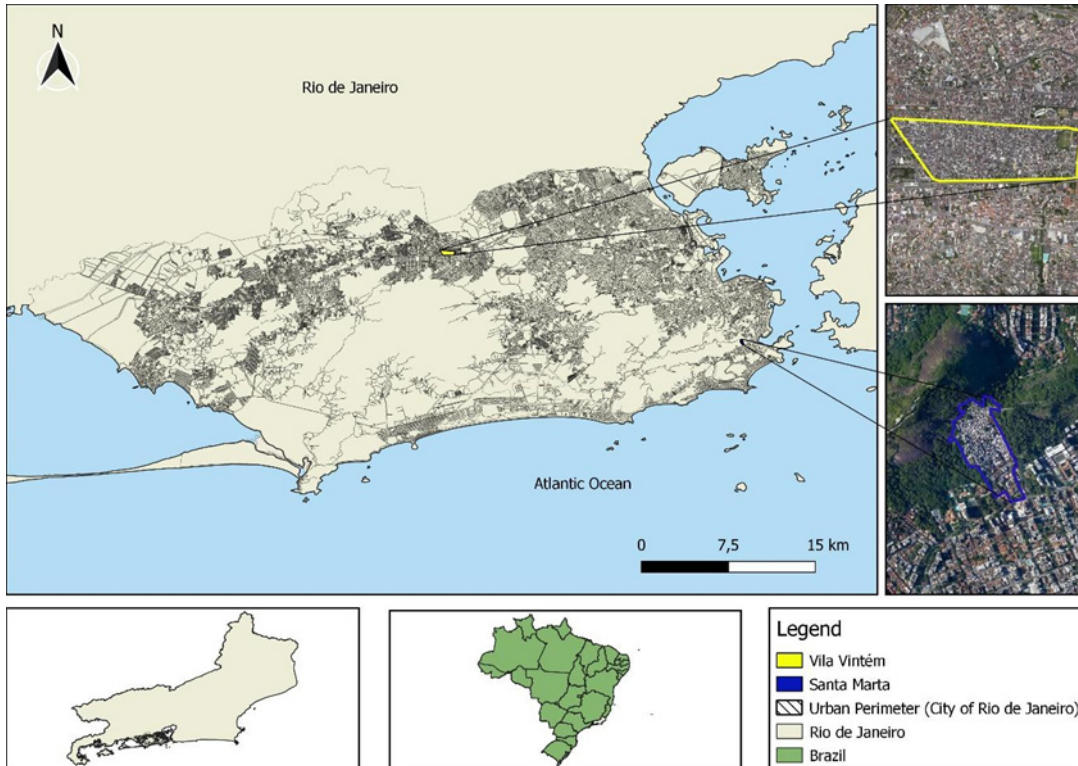
To understand why certain territories and populations required special attention from government during the pandemic, we need to examine demographic data. In 2018, in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro, 30.5% of the Black or Brown population was living in favelas compared to 14.3% of the white population. Similar proportions were found in terms of basic amenities, such as: 12.5% of those who are Black or Brown had no garbage collection, compared to 6% of whites; and 17.9% of Blacks and Browns had no water supply compared to 6% of whites; while 42.8% of Blacks and Browns lacked basic sewerage compared to 26.5% of whites (IBGE, 2019).

The impact of existing inequalities was evident from the onset of the pandemic. According to the Development Secretary of Rio de Janeiro, still in the first months of 2020, the unemployment rate among Black women increased from 17.6% to 22% (Prefeitura, 2021). During the same period, the black population experienced a 20% decrease in formal jobs - while the white population had an 8% decrease for women and a 4% decrease for men. In addition, 72% of the population in favelas said that they could not follow quarantine measures due to economic need. These disparities reflect the systemic and structural issues that perpetuate inequalities in Brazil.

Reflecting on these circumstances, sociologist Marcia Leite (2020) argues that the political responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil “have expanded the historical precariousness endured by the lower classes in our society” (Leite, 2020: 3). Drawing on the ideas of Foucault and Mbembe, Leite describes this phenomenon as a “biopolitics of precariousness” - in which vulnerable populations are caught between “making live precariously” in the absence of public health policies and “letting die” due to the active presence of the state’s police apparatus.

Thus, we argue that with the onset of the pandemic, territorial regimes were modulated into *differential regimes of precariousness*, affecting different territories in distinct settings. Establishing connections between statistical data and empirical descriptions is an unavoidable task for a critical ethnography in times of a pandemic (Rui et al., 2021). This is why we are exploring two favelas in the city of Rio.

**Map 1:** Geographical location of Vila Vintém and Santa Marta. Prepared by the authors using the QGIS Software.



Source: Data Rio.

Informed by the aforementioned framework, and recognizing that favelas in Rio de Janeiro are characterized by different sociocultural and economic contexts (Valladares, 2005), we discuss geographically distinct territories (as indicated in Map 1) that have different backgrounds based on recent public policies. The favela Santa Marta was the first, and an exemplary, “pacified favela”, while the non-pacified Vila Vintém suffered an expanding flow of drug cartels from other parts of the city.

Our objective is to explore how these favelas can be differentiated from one another based on the effects of urban governance and in terms of community-based responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Amid the pandemic scenario, in which the everyday configuration of the state operated as a dually precarious agent (letting people die because of a lack of public health policies and making people die through the violence of police raids), each favela devised different mechanisms to mitigate the risks to life caused by the pandemic.

We will address two community-based actions configured as forms of resistance to the precariousness of the pandemic, even if this resistance is extremely situated, diffuse, and limited. We intend to demonstrate empirical forms of resistance orchestrated by these local groups to deal with the precariousness resettled under the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Community-based actions as a possibility for resistance

### Santa Marta Favela – Botafogo/RJ

As the sun rises on any given weekday, the streets, lanes, and alleyways of the Santa Marta favela in Rio de Janeiro are bustling with people leaving their homes and beginning their commute to work<sup>6</sup>. These workers in professional services are employed in different neighborhoods and regions – and many face the stigma of marginality and urban segregation because of their places of residence. Despite representations of the favelas as a separate urban space and a “problem” for the general territory of the city (Machado da Silva, 2011), residents of these territories belong to the formal and economically productive structure of the formal society.

During the first months of 2020, an unusual sight was witnessed among these workers and their daily hustle: a group of people wearing personal protective equipment, spraying chemical products, and walking at a slower pace. Dodging local residents who descended the stairs towards the exits of the favela, this group of people in distinctive white suits moved in the opposite direction, going up the hills and further into the territory.

**Figure 1:** Community-based sanitization action in favela Santa Marta.



Source: Reproduction – Santa Marta Contra o Covid-19<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Favela Santa Marta is located on the south slope of the hill Dona Marta, in the neighborhood of Botafogo. The favela has its origins in the 1930s, when the territory was occupied due to the ease of access to labor markets in the neighborhoods of the South Zone. Over the past decade, the favela was conceived as the “model favela” for the Pacifying Police Units’ public security program. Despite the 2010 census listing 1,176 households and 3,908 residents, the Residents Association indicates the number of 6,000 residents in 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Available in: <https://www.facebook.com/santamartacontraocovid19>

Following this group, which attracted considerable attention – due to the aesthetics of their clothes and their noisy machines – a change could be noticed in the smells of the environment as the mechanical equipment moved along: the unpleasant odor of dirt was replaced by an acidic, and equally unpleasant smell of cleaning products. The open-air sewerage ditches and heaps of garbage piled up on street corners illustrated the insalubrious conditions of that favela. Amid a global pandemic, these conditions created even further direct and indirect health risks to local inhabitants. In addition to the fear of contracting Covid-19, many favela residents expressed a fear of falling ill to other diseases and not being able to receive healthcare services in public hospitals. After all, the pandemic did not cease the spread of pests and viruses that cause periodic mortality in the city, such as dengue, chikungunya, and zika.

Amidst celebrations of bystanders who crossed their path, applause from residents, hands raised in prayer, and glasses of water being offered, the arduous climb up the stairways and hills of the favela reached an emblematic resting point: a touristic statue of Michael Jackson at a lookout point in the favela. The statue is placed at the location where the artist recorded images for his 1996 music video “They don’t care about us”. Groups with photographic equipment and video cameras were waiting there.

The journalists hurrying towards the clean-up group that had just arrived held microphones displaying the logos of Brazil’s leading TV channels such as Globo, Globonews, Record, Band - and of international broadcasters such as CNN International. The group leader, in a thoroughly articulate technical repertoire, surprised the interviewers as he countered their romanticized narratives about the autonomous actions organized in the favelas. Through his reflections, we can illustrate one of many examples in which “favela organizations’ responses to the state necropolitics represent practices and politics underlying life beyond the current pandemic governance” (Basile, 2022: 14). In his eloquent discourse, the Black man challenged the lenses pointed at him, criticizing and denouncing politicians who produce forms of government that are discriminatory towards the favelas:

The state is not absent, because the police is always here, shooting up the favela. But where is the garbage collection and the maintenance of sewerage pipes? Where is the water distribution? How can we wash our hands as we are instructed to? In the middle of a pandemic, everyone who lives here needs to go to work, but there is no pandemic protection policy for the favela. And we all know there won’t be one! There never has been and there never will be! (Coordinator of the Sanitization Campaign in Favelas – Interview granted in July /2020).

From the top of that hill, the movement of cars, buses, and pedestrians were visible in various parts of the city. For those living in the formal regions of the city, complying with social distancing guidelines, and remaining protected in their homes were feasible possibilities. However, most of the formal and informal workers leaving the favela had to be present for their jobs around the city every day. Therefore, local residents decided to volunteer and mobilize themselves in an example of a “counter-hegemonic, transgressive and imaginative” strategy of insurgent planning in a favela territory (Friendly, 2022). They organized a community-based sanitization action to disinfect the streets and alleyways transited by workers who were obliged to leave their homes during the pandemic to earn their wages and support their families.

**Figure 2:** Poster promoting the community-based action in the favela: “Be a volunteer for sanitization – Santa Marta against Covid-19 – Make a difference – Your support is very important to the continuity of our actions”.



Source: Reproduction - Reproduction – Santa Marta Contra o Covid-19

The coordinator of the action mentioned during a research interview that news about the particular conditions of the first death caused by Covid-19 in the city “awakened” him. According to his narrative, accumulated knowledge led him to understand that the government never guarantees policies planned to safeguard rights and preserve lives in Rio de Janeiro favelas. With the onset of the pandemic, he knew that this situation was unlikely to change. Social inequality in the favela would remain. For them, there would be no signs of a “new normal”.

The mobilization to sanitize the Santa Marta favela rapidly attracted notoriety on digital networks, in online news stories, and even in national and international newspaper headlines. The initiative was only possible because this community leader had experience in articulating his accumulated experiences and networks (Mano & Menezes, 2021). With a long life trajectory of involvement in a range of community-based organizations, in addition to his profession as a favela tourist guide and entrepreneur, he managed to articulate various contacts and collaborations to organize, facilitate, and publicize the mobilization. This experience allows analyzing how different capacities, interests, and interlocutions were articulated to exercise a collective “network capital” (Elliot & Urry, 2010; Urry, 2012), materializing forms of action based on capacities to generate, sustain, and implement relationships through the development of connectivity and digital technologies.

This network capital involved the resident’s previous contacts inside and outside the favela, in addition to the productive use of digital communication technologies. Contacts and information gathered by the community leader made it possible to devise a pandemic mitigation mobilization to protect lives in the favela (Menezes & Mano, 2020).

The connection between empirical situations and theoretical contributions allows us to advance some lines of reflection. The sanitization resulted in an apparent reduction in the expected number of deaths in the favela, raised community awareness about the pandemic and gained media repercussion of complaints

against the government<sup>8</sup>. Nonetheless, despite the general impact in national and international newspapers and the apparent effectiveness of community-based sanitization actions, the initiative did not receive any institutional support from the city or state government, such as financial resources or appropriate equipment. This leads us to reflect on how it is “normalized” that certain social groups must act (and survive) on their own - as analyzed in the work of Polycarpo and Fleury (2022) based on the discourses spread by the government and part of the commercial media.

Complementarily, despite the general perception of positive results from the community-based sanitization, residents in the favela reported various problems. In addition to deaths, multiple indirect forms of exposure to death have been aggravated in the Santa Marta favela, such as: numerous cases of depression, suspension of continued clinical care services for elderly women, as well as several families who now lacked financial assistance due to other deaths. Among multiple cases of abuse related to police violence, one incident is quite illustrative. During a police raid on a morning in January 2021, a resident was awakened by police officers who invaded his house with guns pointed at him and his daughter. Favela residents were facing precariousness compounded by urban violence and the pandemic: in addition to the risk of life posed by guns, and police officers not wearing masks.

### Vila Vintém Favela – Padre Miguel/RJ

Favela Vila Vintém<sup>9</sup> is situated in the West Zone of the city of Rio de Janeiro. During the first weeks of the pandemic, there was no “new normal” as the environment remained similar to how it had been in previous months: workers coming and going, children playing in the streets, people walking around without protection masks, and facial expressions denoting total serenity. Although the city was already under social distancing measures at the time, and given the abundant information conveyed by the media about the lethality of the virus, the everyday life of the community continued as if the risks of the pandemic were located elsewhere – as if the favela was not part of that pandemic reality. As the socioeconomic profile of the local residents is comprised mostly of poor subjects, and racially composed as predominantly Black and Brown, people had to pursue their livelihood by working - formally or informally. To “stay home” was not an option.

In the following months, with the rise in Covid-19 infections and deaths in Rio de Janeiro, the dynamics slowly shifted. While the mainstream media amplified information about the escalation of cases and deaths of Covid-19, rumors began to circulate around the territory of Vila Vintém. People were mentioning that residents were contracting the disease and even dying from complications caused by the virus. While this information was not verifiable, it raised awareness in the community. The pandemic was no longer distant. It had arrived at the doorsteps of the favela, traversing their lives and their everyday habits.

Soon, in late April, the local drug cartel ordered an indefinite suspension of the traditional *baile funk*<sup>10</sup>. This information was shared with its organizers and the public through networks of people with ties to organized crime – wives, family members, and friends of drug dealers. To legitimate the order, an image that circulated

8 A study conducted by a team from the Radioecology and Global Changes Laboratory of the State University of Rio de Janeiro with equipment called “Coronatrack” found significant results regarding this mobilization. They concluded that aspects such as ventilation, humidity, and the agglomeration of houses made the sanitization more effective in the favela than in other places without these features. They also mentioned that when sanitization was more frequent, there were fewer cases of Covid-19 in the territory (Evangelista et al., 2022).

9 Vila Vintém is a favela in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro, more specifically in Planning Area 5. Located in a flat topographic region between the neighborhoods of Padre Miguel and Realengo, it has an estimated population of 15,298 inhabitants (according to the 2010 Census), which makes it one of the largest favelas in the region. The location is a symbol of Rio’s criminal underworld, being the birthplace of the criminal faction Amigo-dos-Amigos (ADA), which still controls the favela today.

10 The baile funk, or funk party, is a musical event that takes place in the favela, usually organized by the drug cartel. Local residents along with people from other regions interact to the music broadcast by huge speakers at an extremely loud volume. Drugs and alcohol are commonly sold at these events.



on WhatsApp groups organized by Vila Vintém residents showed the boss of the favela – who was in prison at the time – alongside information about a curfew in every territory dominated by that criminal group. The image also included a specific order to suspend the *baile funk* in Vila Vintém.

That image signified that rumors about the risks of the pandemic were true and that residents now needed to take the pandemic more seriously. In addition to many residents, even people with social ties to the illegal drug trade began wearing masks (of all kinds) motivated by orders from the local drug cartel.

Observing “what moves” based on the conceptual framework of the “mobilities turn” not only refers to bodies in effective, potential, or interrupted circulation. Images and information also engage in intermittent movements, which “in a real or potential way, organizes and structures social life” (Sheller & Urry, 2006: 212). Many residents reflected that the criminal organization’s actions were influenced by the rising number of infections in Rio de Janeiro and the favela itself.

In dialogs with a local resident - a middle-aged Black woman – one of us learned about the importance of the media for insights to the context of the pandemic. According to this interlocutor, it was through television news and social media posts that the population of Vila Vintém realized the seriousness of the situation. It’s possible that this also motivated the intervention of non-state criminal actors in the territory. It is important to point out that the curfew in question was not an arbitrary imposition, forcing all residents to comply without question. Due to the softened and less emphatic discourse of the drug cartel, residents understood it as a guideline – a way to make the population aware of the risks of the disease.

From a sanitary perspective, the suspension of the *baile funk* was essential for mitigating the risk of infection in the favela. Yet it caused losses to criminals and local businesses – because the event is essential to the local economy. This funk party usually took place almost every Saturday night, attracting around 3,000 people - including local residents and people from adjacent regions. The *baile funk* was suspended between late April and early July 2020. Research has shown that, in recent years, drug cartels have lost income in the city of Rio de Janeiro<sup>11</sup>. The drug cartel in Vila Vintém gave up part of its revenue to implement an incisive order against the Covid-19 pandemic.

According to Arias (2013), favelas with strong criminal consolidation and low proximity by the state have a kind of shared territorial control. Vila Vintém is an example in which, regardless of the extent to which criminal leaders control the local population, there is a constant need to remain cautious to not provoke an all-out conflict with the state. In this regard, the “favela boss” has historically sought to expand the supply of “political goods” (Misse, 1999) to state agents – even if such arrangements did not always prevent armed conflicts. This attitude was justified by the fact that he is considered an “old school” leader, who had never been deprived of his authority and who conveys a paternalistic and philanthropic image. This figure can be understood as a kind of “seasoned bandit” (Zaluar, 1985), someone that respects local residents. In turn, the local community perceives these agents as vigilantes who protect their area from violent enemies. These characteristics are essential to perpetuate their legitimacy among the local population and maintain agreements with state agents.

Many of the residents in Vila Vintém struggled to adapt their lives to the new pandemic reality. Despite the drug cartel’s instructions, people continued to gather in groups in the favela, often without masks. Since they needed to work because of their precarious financial condition, they also wanted to preserve their means of entertainment. Many of them asked similar questions: “Why is it normal to be at risk when working, but we can’t enjoy our free time? Why is only one kind of exposure important?” Without the *baile funk*, some residents began to search for leisure activities in bars in the favela. The “boredom” of adapting to health safety norms was replaced by the dangerous pursuit of entertainment options, even if this meant going against the drug cartel’s explicit guidelines.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion about the drug cartels’ loss of profitability in Rio de Janeiro, see Hirata and Grillo (2019). On the consequences of this loss of profitability for crime, see Da Motta (2020).

A specific situation in May 2020 was a divisive moment amid this conflict of expectations regarding the pandemic. As a result of their pursuit of leisure, many people began to gather at a bar located on one of the main streets in the community. After the suspension of the baile funk was ordered, this bar began to receive many more clients than customary – to the point where people crowded in the street because there was no more room inside the establishment.

That month, an image of people agglomerated in front of the bar circulated - both in formal media and in WhatsApp groups around the city. It was perceived as a symbol of the general contempt for social distancing rules in the city's West Zone. More than 300 people, mostly youngsters, were seen attending this bar in the favela.

The image depicts a street completely packed with people, leaving little space to walk. The photo also “went viral” on digital networks such as Twitter and Facebook, causing deep discomfort among local residents and criminals. There were already orders to end such overcrowding situations in the favela. Following this incident, drug dealers took action and closed the bar with chains and padlocks. This was a display of their power to arbitrate in the territory. The owner of the bar did not suffer physical or violent retaliations, but his establishment was closed without financial compensation.

**Figure 4** – Crowding at a bar in Vila Vintém



Source: Received through social media - modified by the authors.

Forms of circulation are important ways of informing and structuring everyday life. A few days later, a Volkswagen Kombi [van] with a powerful loudspeaker drove around the favela announcing the following message:

Attention! Attention, residents of Vila Vintém! Walking in the community without masks is prohibited. Avoid crowds in bars as well as parties in any bar or environment within the community. If you are a resident or visitor, and you know how our community works, and your car has tinted windows, be sure to lower the windows when you enter the community to avoid any accidents, whether during the day or at night.

The closure of the bar was a clear indication that the drug cartel was no longer sharing instructions, but imposing a definitive order during the pandemic – something that also happened in other favelas (Miagusko & Da Motta, 2021). The local criminals asserted their authority, converting guidelines into a punishable norm in the event of transgression. It should be noted that this norm only applied to leisure venues that caused crowding. At no time did the drug dealers interfere with people’s work or religious activities in the favela.

Following the event, people began to comply with the order and avoided public gatherings. However, the residents changed their strategies and began to organize private parties and gatherings in their own houses. Walking around the community, one could see people in smaller groups inside their homes, enjoying loud music, dancing, games, and conversation. The drug cartel did not take any action against small-scale gatherings as they were taking place inside residents’ private spaces. This suggests that the sovereignty of the drug dealers is primarily restricted to public spaces in the favela, with some exceptions. These occur when people display serious hostility towards the power of the cartel, such as listening to “proibidão” [absolutely prohibited] funk songs from other criminal groups or invoking symbolic elements from enemy cartels.

The cartel imposed a biopolitical authority through the political position of protecting the favela population from the local effects of a global pandemic. After the definitive order, residents were forced to reduce crowding in public places and to seek private interactions. Local business owners also began demanding the use of masks inside their establishments. These orders lasted until mid-July 2020, when the cartel began to relax the guidelines, allowing bars to reopen and suggesting the optional use of masks inside the favela. Interestingly, the chronology of these isolation measures and their relaxation in Vila Vintém closely follows the city government’s guidelines. In June 2020, the city of Rio de Janeiro began a gradual reopening of the city in five phases – as a result of social pressure and political disputes, particularly from local and national economic sectors<sup>12</sup>. The local drug cartel may have been following these same guidelines in the favela to implement its “power technique” (Foucault, 1979).

The case of Vila Vintém allows us to reflect on contradictions encountered during the pandemic in Rio de Janeiro related to the state’s political production and different types of “territorial regimes” (Leite, 2014, 2017). According to residents we interviewed, there were no public policies concerning sanitization or awareness-raising during this period, yet there was an increase in police raids and consequently armed conflicts. Therefore, we observe not only a clash between legal and illegal boundaries (Telles, 2010) but also the inversion of moral boundaries. The legal order configures itself as a double agent of precariousness (Butler, 2015; Mbembe, 2016; Fassin, 2018): a) when it does not politically safeguard its population from the risk of infection, and b) when it exposes them to risk of death through police raids. On the other hand, the illegal order of the local drug cartel indicates how it uses its strength and authority to carry out a public awareness campaign for mitigating risks of the disease.

<sup>12</sup> <<https://prefeitura.rio/cidade/prefeitura-anuncia-fase-4-da-flexibilizacao-pontos-turisticos-voltam-com-regras-comercio-de-rua-abre-mais-cedo-aos-sabados-e-estacionamento-da-oria-sera-liberado/>> Accessed on November/2021.

## Final Considerations: the “old normal” in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro

Although the expression “new normal” may accurately describe the general situation of many Brazilian social groups during the Covid-19 pandemic, the idea is clearly inconsistent for analyzing the empirical reality of Rio de Janeiro favelas. If this concept is based on circumstances brought by the pandemic, in terms of social isolation for protection and survival, it surely does not consider these territories. We are not affirming that there was nothing new. However, the new standards for some social groups were only possible because many others did not experience a similar transformation of their “normality”. The pandemic social dynamics were not “democratic”.

Favelas in Rio de Janeiro are very diverse (Preteceille & Valladares, 2000), but we can argue that the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated general inequalities. Ethnographic analyses confirm and requalify statistical data. An already challenging situation was worsened through price increases associated to the inadequate distribution of income and insufficient public protection by the federal government. This dynamic particularly affected low-income Brazilians - mainly Blacks and residents of peripheries and favelas (Lima, 2020).

These are the socioeconomic necessities that implied conditions of precariousness for those who couldn't “stay home”. When the pandemic started, we reached long-term interlocutors and nobody mentioned any comments or perceptions about a “new normality”. The sensation of neglect by the government was supported by previous experiences in life. There was no “new normal” in Rio's favelas because the Covid-19 pandemic context presented a continuity of historical social inequalities.

As Leite and Machado (2008) noted, the Brazilian state does not operate in the favelas through the language of rights, because these populations are historically relegated to a “citizenship of variable geometry”. In this logic, residents of territories such as the favelas in Rio are not perceived by government rationalities as social groups to be protected and safeguarded by state policies.

Reflecting on what is considered “normal” for these populations, we must highlight that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the favelas of Rio remained under the previous governmental logic of a biopolitics of precariousness. Three prominent dimensions of the “normality” in these territories should be noted: a) the socioeconomic inequalities that were exacerbated in the pandemic; b) the neglect of state institutions that did not mitigate the risks of the disease through public policies; and c) the public security agents that expanded their policy of confrontational warfare. During the Covid-19 pandemic, what was experienced in Rio de Janeiro's favelas was not a “new normal”, but an “old normal” perpetuated through political neglect, lack of public protection, and armed production of risks to life.

Nevertheless, despite these deepened circumstances of inequalities, there are forms of political imagination that emerge from these initiatives (Telles et al., 2020). This is why we described resistance strategies in these two territories. A network of contacts was essential to make it possible for community leaders in Santa Marta to criticize the lack of public protection and articulate a community-based mobilization. On the other side of the city, the population of Vila Vintém experienced “mimicry” of the state by drug traffickers, showing that in addition to the power and violence of the state (Grillo, 2013), other actors were able to “control biopolitics” (Foucault, 2005) given the lack of public awareness and hygiene policies.

To conclude, we highlight the discourse of various social leaders of historically marginalized groups who articulated resistance actions during the pandemic: the government should have also protected their lives, families, and territories with public policies. Many of them raised an argument that emerged from the narratives produced during the Covid-19 pandemic. If we are going to think about a “new” normality, this scenario should compensate for the public policies that have historically segregated certain populations. For this reason, it is necessary to learn from the knowledge and experiences that are organized in the favelas and peripheries of Brazil.

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# From anthropology of things to anthropology of technology: Is there a place for co-production of techniques?

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## Abstract

We address the version of an ontological turn as a methodological imprint of the coproduction of knowledge. Although this perspective carries on a methodological effort to shed new light on object study through recursiveness, it neglects the importance of technical action. The present article aims to deepen the methodological venues offered by the ontological turn to address the notion of co-production related to techniques. Departing from the analyses of ethnographic contexts, we discuss whether experimentation as axes of co-production resonates with other methodological devices provided by the anthropology of technology. We argue that philistinism, inflection, and possibilism of material affordances colligate with experimentation reflected in different practices, overcoming representational bias and posthumanist excesses.

**Keywords:** experimentation, inflection, methods, resonance, philistinism, possibilism.

# Da antropologia das coisas à antropologia da tecnologia: há lugar para a coprodução de técnicas?

## Resumo

Abordamos a versão da virada ontológica como um cunho metodológico de coprodução de conhecimento. Embora essa perspectiva realize um esforço metodológico para lançar uma nova luz sobre o estudo do objeto por meio da recursividade, ela negligencia a importância da ação técnica. O presente artigo visa aprofundar os caminhos metodológicos oferecidos pela virada ontológica para abordar a noção de coprodução relacionada às técnicas. A partir das análises de contextos etnográficos, discutimos se a experimentação como eixos de coprodução ressoa com outros dispositivos metodológicos proporcionados pela antropologia da tecnologia. Defendemos que o filistinismo, a inflexão e o possibilismo das affordances materiais coligam com a experimentação refletida em diferentes práticas, superando o viés representacional e os excessos pós-humanistas.

**Palavras-chave:** experimentação, inflexão, métodos, ressonância, filistinismo, possibilismo.

# From anthropology of things to anthropology of technology: Is there a place for co-production of techniques?

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In the twilight of the action-structure paradigm in the social sciences and especially in anthropology, agency-based accounts have proliferated. These are at least partially concerned with analyzing a myriad of existing entities, including objects (Appadurai, 1991; Gell, 1998; Miller, 2005). These efforts have expanded the critical stances of the postmodernist and relativist approaches in anthropology, which attempted to overcome excessive formalism (Barnard, 2004). Nevertheless, approaches such as the ontological turn have gone beyond taking culture as text within a hermeneutic or interpretative framework: they have renewed the critique of representing alterity as beyond cultural analysis (Descola, 1996; Viveiros de Castro, 1996). Hence, the ontological turn has tried to explain a diversity of worlds and not just worldviews (Salmond, 2014).

Likewise, the ontological turn has also reacted against the Marxist perspective, wherein objects encompass the physical correlates of culture, encoded in symbols (Henare *et al.*, 2007). Material culture was assessed only through its surrogate role, which privileged the cultural sphere as a cognitive domain. Since ontological approaches have studied Indigenous peoples in regions such as Amazonia or Melanesia, they have been associated exclusively with exotic societies, appealing to an ontological relativism in terms of cartographies of differences (Bessire and Bond, 2014).

However, this ontological approach in anthropology is more concerned with a methodological program based on recursive ethnography and knowledge co-production within fieldwork (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017; Salmond, 2014). This methodological stance aims to give nuance to the effects of the encounter between researchers and human cultural worlds, seeking to create productive tensions and interactions. At ground level, it is about creating the conditions to access the ethnographic data, not only through a clinical gaze or abductive reasoning *about* people, but via a learning process that includes people.

This creating with people evokes a recursive loop between ethnographic materials and analytical resources or co-production (Henare *et al.*, 2007). Expanding upon this idea, Martin Holbraad and Morton Pedersen (2017) offer up a methodological account of co-production through three axes: reflexivity, conceptualization, and experimentation, understood as an intensification of earlier ways of thinking in anthropology.

However, even when these methodological efforts attempt to cope with artifacts in terms of thinking through things, ethnographic settings involving things dissolve corporeal engagement with artifacts, neglecting the importance of technical action. Pierre Lemonnier (2012) stresses the gap between two academic labels: cultural technology and material culture studies. The former pays attention to the ways things are made and physically used while the latter concentrates on the cultural biography of things in terms of circulation and consumption.

The same author also suggests, however, that there has recently been a renewed focus upon the relationship between techniques and culture, dealing with the productive tensions between these academic labels, enlightening reciprocal effects of technical and material actions as crucial elements of different practices (Lemonnier, 2014). It is thus crucial to stress that while the ontological turn questioned several versions of representation-based accounts, mediation between humans and artifacts through techniques has not yet received sufficient attention.

Since technology concerns action and involves cognitive issues, anthropology's technological analysis consequently demands a cognitive proposal. Cognitive features could be associated with the idea of methods and mediation, insofar as it encompasses corporeal procedures anthropologists take on within their fieldwork (Hutchins, 1995; Menary, 2010; Varela et al., 1991). At the same time, corporeal procedures become techniques of the body (*sensu* Mauss, 1973), reflecting a loop between the material engagement of people with artifacts (production, use, and performance) and anthropological methods themselves.

The present article aims to locate methodological resonances between experimentation as co-production and different methodological insights. It also seeks to bring into focus methodological inputs made by the anthropology of technology within the British tradition and anthropology of technique of the French tradition in order to revamp our approaches to technological phenomena by taking into consideration recursiveness or coproduction.

In order to establish this connection, we first present efforts that emancipate objects from their alleged subsidiary role, trying to shed light on how bringing humans and artifacts together always already entails a mediation process. Later, we will expose methodological imprints within the anthropology of technology and technique, establishing different consequences or resonators with recursive ethnography.

Finally, we will address how the ontological turn promotes knowledge co-production looking at how technologies embodied in practices reflect shared cognitive processes between technical expertise and social constraints within the anthropological practice. We conclude by arguing that an intertwined recursive ethnography focusing on corporeal procedures enlightens new ways for anthropologists to grapple with coproduction techniques.

## **The anthropology of things from the ontological turn**

The social life of things has been one of the most important approaches for focusing on objects beyond their place in museographical collections or curiosity cabinets. To a substantial extent, the social life of things is a precursor of agency-based accounts, which implies an ethnographic methodology that regards objects like people, generating cultural biographies of commodities through the analysis of value regimes (Appadurai, 1991). This perspective has been fruitful because it allows us to follow the paths of artifacts -- oriental rug production in Iran, for example, or *qat* consumption in Yemen -- which illuminate the circulation of phenomena through different contexts and value regimes (Cassanelli, 1991; Spooner, 1991).

Nonetheless, some advocates of radical accounts -- those promoting the idea that objects stand out by themselves -- argue that cultural biographies are still connected to a humanist notion of artifacts, constituting simple associations or assemblages with humans. This bias was qualified as anthropocentric by those scholars with more exacerbated fetishistic inclinations, which resulted in more relational approaches toward human and non-human networks. According to this critique, the movement underlying an object's circulation after its production is external to the thing itself in the constitutive interest of human value regimes (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017).

Other agency-based accounts concern Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and Tim Ingold's ecological perspective on materials, which embrace more relational approaches to objects (Ingold, 2000, 2011; Latour, 2015). According to ANT, however, non-humans -- either materials or artifacts -- must look towards transformation from a semiotic view, conforming to new entities or assemblages of humans and non-humans. Even in the case of a gunman, there is no arithmetical relationship or summing up of attributes that conform to this assemblages. Rather, there is a technical mediation between the human hand, the equilibrium of supporting the gun, and good shooting.

Regarding the ecology of materials, Ingold mobilizes a theory of enskillment. Some ontologists linked to recursive ethnography stress, however, the normative character of Ingold's theory, arguing that it tries to replace scientific ontology (Chua and Salmond, 2012; Ingold, 1997, 2000). According to this perspective, the ethnographic method in ANT and the ecology of materials weakens and is divorced from real informants' life experiences. Recursive ethnography rejects any theoretical bias about what an object is as a point of departure. Instead, this perspective advocates overlapping thinking with lived experience; that is, thinking through things and, at the same time, challenging dichotomous perspectives regarding persons and objects, matter and meaning, representation and reality (Henare *et al.*, 2007).

Recursive ethnography is thus more concerned with ethnographic reflexivity rather than the incommensurability of world experiences. The recursive focus seeks to trace the paths of ethnographic objects, which are more than mere subjects, defining themselves in their own terms. The notion of different worlds is not an ontological claim but a methodological strategy to invoke realities constrained by the presence or absence of entities, concepts, or movements generated within cosmopolitical relations (Hanks and Severi, 2014; Salmond, 2014).

Expanding this proposal, Martin Holbraad and Morton Pedersen (2017) offer a renewed synthesis of the ontological turn, arguing in favor of three methodological axes: reflexivity, conceptualization, and experimentation. Departing from an alleged convergence between three anthropological traditions embodied in Roy Wagner, Viveiros de Castro, and Marilyn Strathern, the authors embrace common themes such as internal relations and horizontal abstractions to intensify old concerns regarding creative imprints. These authors addressed the ontological stance in terms of to what extent a posthumanist approach to things allows these to have the same kind of reflexive effects on conceptualization as people. In other words, how do things dictate forms of engagement through their material properties?

Here, we focus on experimentation as a third venue to intensify ways of operating within anthropological coproduction. Experimentation recognizes that anthropological knowledge results from a particular fieldwork encounter and its contingencies. According to Holbraad and Pedersen (2017), anthropologists do not just use themselves as research tools but also use the transformation of themselves and their interlocutors as a primary source of knowledge. This kind of methodological imprint advocates for maximal variance and the production of coproduced results.

These methodological stances draw on posthumanism's approach to things, which is not concerned with how these intertwine with the lives of humans but on how they stand by themselves. Holbraad and Pedersen's (2017) argument asserts that if, in any given ethnographic context, things are non-things (i.e., an artifact that contains spirits or an angry river), then the notion of a thing can have a heuristic role. These heuristics means we must de-theorize things, rendering them in a purely ethnographic form subjected to the thing's own exigencies and contingencies.

We have seen that the anthropology of things, viewed from the ontological turn, elucidates a procedural refinement by intensifying methodological concerns. Although this movement allows things an ontological self-determination, the role of corporeal mediation remains as a gap between things themselves and the intellectual exercise of thinking through things. Likewise, we see that the technical and cognitive implications of this way of perceiving the world are either absent or unexplored because recursive ethnography seeks to explain things through a generalized notion of thinking.

How can we explain thinking through things? If thinking is not exclusively a mental action, it entails corporeal procedures featuring cognition in terms of mediation. Nevertheless, how far does mediation encompass experimentation in the co-production of techniques?

## The anthropology of technology: cognition, techniques, and sociotechnical systems

We set out, above, how the technology concerning culture and cognition opens a critical stance, stretching from anthropological perspectives to a critique of the hylomorphic theory of matter and, more recently, to the concept of material culture itself (Hicks, 2010). The hylomorphic theory of matter supported museological or stylistic approaches to artifacts mainly through trait analysis, which led some authors to critically consider technology as something other than the result of a mental blueprint, by incorporating cognitive scaffoldings, for example (Hicks, 2010; Ingold 2007a).

Likewise, the anthropology of technique within the French tradition has offered outstanding contributions to cognition and culture. Ethnology linked to prehistory offered the most significant insights since Leroi-Gourhan's (1971) account of operatory chain and expansive memory concepts. While his contributions are still a reference today in addressing the relationship between technology and cognition (de Beaune 2004), his effort to naturalize technogenesis in early hominins favors a biased reading of the individual as a species, individually attributing the creation of techniques. Nevertheless, as we will see below, the notion of the *milieu technique* allows us to glimpse how skills emerge from a socially enriched environment (Leroi-Gourhan, 1989).

By situating analyses at a social level, the ethnographic research of Pierre Lemonnier (1992) offers up a comparative method applied to both tribal societies like the Anga of New Guinea and to aeronautical industries, establishing a symmetrical thesis in ethnographic fieldwork. According to Lemonnier, Mauss defines technics as effective and traditional, not different from the magical, religious, or symbolic action. Action concerns body posture, while traditional refers to the fact that execution has been inherited and learned through generations. Effective action points to body posture that seeks a physical outcome, involving several elements of technological systems: matter (body), energy (things, tools), gestures (operational sequences), and specific knowledge (know-how, choices, and social representation) (Lemonnier, 1992).

On the one hand, Lemonnier stresses technical questions: not about artifacts themselves, but about the arbitrariness of the technological choices underlying artifact production. On the other hand, he emphasizes technological systems as constitutive elements that involve techniques, cultural phenomena, and social representations. It is essential to note here that this approach is not entirely antagonistic to the epistemology of representation, but rather challenges the notion of information embedded in style, addressing matter beyond artifactual form and function. Operational sequences or actions of execution based on an operational chain constitute the primary data of this kind of anthropology of technological systems.

At the same time that Lemonnier was developing his ethnographic perspective, Bryan Pfaffenberger (1992) established another proposal, taking technological issues to a more sociological level and departing from what he called "sociotechnical systems". It is crucial to distinguish between techniques and sociotechnical systems. The former are constituted by material resources, tools, operational sequences, and coordination modes that allow artifact construction. The latter concern technological activities underlying techniques and social coordination work. The internal logic of a sociotechnical system responds to political and economic dynamics, promoting solidarity woven by social relations, some of which could be ritual in nature (Pfaffenberger, 1992).

Although Pfaffenberger's account emerged from the relationship between sociology and STS, it shares with Lemonnier's a critical stance regarding the informational bias that stresses style over performance. The author characterized the ritual dimension as a tension between sentences and subversive answers, which seeks to react against the domination imposed by social structures, addressing technological activities as a political matter: a technological conflict (Pfaffenberger, 1988).

Treating artefacts as texts opens up multiple interpretations in which a hegemonic discourse can be challenged or removed. Sociotechnical systems appear as an alternative resulting from a technological possibilism, the link between an artifact's causal and physical potential, and the innovation derived from human organization (Díaz Cruz, 1995; Ingold 1997; Pfaffenberger 1988, 1992).

## The anthropology of technology and anthropology of technique from the ontological turn: is there a place for co-production of techniques?

From the above, it is clear that recursive ethnography has methodological differences as compared with the early anthropologies of technology and technique. Nonetheless, both perspectives converge significantly, especially with regards to their critical stance on representation-based accounts. However, since recursive ethnography seeks to shed light on artifactual analyses that copes with scaffoldings of thinking, it takes the artifact's existence for granted, neglecting action on matter and manufacturing processes' technical concerns.

In order to understand the neglect of technical action or mediation within recursive ethnography, it is essential to unravel how thinking through things evokes the ethnography of things. This kind of ethnography put forward the question of whether heuristically defined things might be able to contribute to their conceptual variation. Conceptual variation elicits data to make a (conceptual) difference concerning the transformation of materials into forms of analytical thought.

Instead of treating all the things as modes of representation, equating concepts and things, recursive ethnography seeks to overcome the analysis of artifacts in terms of their material properties (form and function). However, recursive ethnographic case studies do not involve things created through technical action, as occurred with Ifa dust on Cuba. This artefact's power in specific ritual contexts is carried through motricity and performance, and not necessarily techniques (Holbraad, 2007). Something similar occurs with the talismans of thought presented by Morton Pedersen (2007), which describe a detailed Mongolian shamanistic session related to two artifacts: costumes and vessels. Pedersen's approach was partially based on cognitive science's Extended Mind Theory, which sought to explore extended beliefs or extended selves through the employment of shamanistic paraphernalia (i.e. artifacts). Pedersen unfortunately does not go into details regarding costume and vessel production techniques.

As we said before, the engagement of the ontological turn is, in a broad sense, more methodological than theoretical, meaning that artifactual production involves reflexivity, conceptualization, and experimentation to achieve knowledge co-production (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017). Likewise, the notion of thinking through things privileges reflexivity and conceptualization, leaving unexplored other methodological axes such as experimentation. We want to determine how this methodological axis could be applied to envisage the co-production of techniques, especially when they resonate with mediation through gesture, possibilism, and operational sequences. At the most basic level, we are interested in a provocative breakthrough in understanding to what extent the anthropologies of technology and technique might be merged in a fruitful dialogue.

The anthropology of technology tends to relational analysis beyond function and design. This has been possible through a theory of practice that is closer to formulations on cognitive phenomena using ecological and phenomenological insights (Bateson, 1972; Gibson, 1979; Ingold, 1997). Putting forward a practical stance initially significantly impacts the methodological axis of experimentation (*sensu* Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017). On the one hand, it allows for identifying how anthropologists use their bodies as an instrument and an object of investigation. On the other hand, a theory of practice involves learning processes that bring about contingencies in encounters with informants, which play an essential role as a source of knowledge.

Currently, at least three recent anthropologically informed proposals are coping with the technological phenomenon from a theory of practice: the skillful practice-based accounts of Tim Ingold (2018), the Material Engagement Theory of Lambros Malafouris and Colin Renfrew (2010), and Alfred Gell's (1998) abduction of agency. We discuss some insights of these proposals to account for a recombinant anthropology of technology in the light of methodological experimentation. We think this analysis revamps an approach to artifactual production by setting out in what senses we can talk of co-production of techniques within different anthropological traditions.



One of the most influential anthropologists is Tim Ingold, who conceives of thought as embodied and enacted, and of cognition as distributed across person, activity, and setting (Ingold 2007, 2000). Starting with Gibson's notion of affordances, Ingold develops how cognitive features rely on environmental opportunities through dwelling, the education of attention, and skillful habits (Ingold, 2018). Skillful practice appeals to anthropologists in an ongoing process of learning through time, however, lasting until they eventually reach the same degree of native expertise. This is seen, for example, in the correct use of a reindeer's lasso in Lapland (Ingold, 1993). Thus, at first glance, the relational approach is only external, either related to grappling with different traditional techniques or shedding light on perceptions of the environment (Ingold, 2000).

The second proposal concerns Gell's account of technology, which constitutes an aesthetic critique of fine and primitive art conceived as a technical system. Gell focuses on how the distributive character of agency spans in an artifact is constitutive of a cognitive process called "the abduction of agency", displayed when specific effects or affects (i.e. beauty or magic) are perceived (Gell, 2006). While Gell's account acknowledges a second-order agency for artifacts, while privileging first order agency for humans, his interest lies more in the circulation and effects of artifacts embedded in social entanglements rather than in their production (Gell, 1998).

Finally, the last proposal within British anthropological tradition is the Material Engagement Theory of Lambros Malafouris and Colin Renfrew. This approach aims to shed light on the link between material culture and cognition, embracing questions such as what kind of relations and interactions describe vital connexions between brains, things, and bodies? This strategy seeks to enhance our understanding of the expression and diversity of human thought through material agency, relying on material engagement itself. Consequently, these authors stress how and when the in-between (i.e. interface) emerges in the relation of an artisan to his brute material (Malafouris, 2016; Malafouris and Renfrew, 2010).

These three proposals share fieldwork practices as their point of departure. Nevertheless, the authors maintain different degrees of awareness related to co-production. Each gives a margin to balance the experimentation axis and other methodological devices from the anthropology of technology that shed light on how to characterize a coproduction of techniques.

Although these approaches can be and are qualified as humanist accounts of things, they still promote a relational view that we are interested in connecting to other methodological devices of co-production techniques. Some authors like Ingold explicitly reject data (including interaction with informants) as original inspiration for anthropological knowledge. Instead, Ingold puts forward individual creativity and synthesis resulting from a combination of data and previous ethnographies (Ingold, 2018). However, he lets us carefully analyze skillment processes within ethnographic settings. How to throw a lasso, for example. This is a matter of recognizing inflection not as movement but as a way in which movement moves. At the same time, inflection evokes other methodological devices like operational sequences (*sensu* Leroi-Gouhron), which, more than framing a pattern, step by step, identifies rhythms and fluxes (Di Deus, 2019).

Unlike Ingold, Gell's account conceives of creativity as related to effects on people. Insofar as the authorship of art stretches into the artifact itself, however, what matters here is not the act of production but agency (Gell, 1998). Creativity is a central feature of Gell's methodology, especially in diagrams and visual representations. His approach, however, also understood artifacts as beyond individual technical expertise. The examples provided by Gell concern cars that refuse to start due to damaged engines or landmines in Cambodia, which embody and enact the intention to kill, leading Gell to assert that mines have agency.

Even when the ethnographic data does not support the attribution of agency, it is worth pointing out that Gell provides a methodological insight to figure out a path towards experimentation. Insofar as methodological philistinism concerns an attitude of a resolute indifference towards the aesthetic values underlying art

(Gell, 2006; Morphy, 2010), this suspension of judgment could be essential to the silent and non-verbal knowledge implicit in operational sequences.

Finally, Material Engagement Theory is inspired by fieldwork undertaken on the island of Zakynthos, Greece, comparing different ceramic workshops to enlighten how different potters think creatively with materials and techniques. Malafouris also concedes, however, that the final responsibility relapses to humans, as in the artisan is the source of normativity related to correct or incorrect form and function (Knappett *et al.*, 2010). Although this approach could be considered a humanist stance with regards to objects, some valuable methodological inputs can be had with regards to the notion of the container.

In his study of ceramic containers as a privileged issue of archaeology, Carl Knappett and Lambros Malafouris (2010) examine the idea of the body as a container that plays an essential (i.e. cognitive) role in shaping human intelligence. According to these authors, containers are not just vessels, but possibilities for action that bring forth forms of mediated action in terms of use and manufacture that stretch beyond functionality. Consequently, there are no boundaries in human engagement with the material world or fixed roles between agents and patients, or between artisans, technical action, and materials. What exists is the entanglement of affordances. It is worth pointing out that these affordances are the material scaffoldings that play a role in shaping artifacts.

Taking into account these methodological insights, a further step would be recovering methodological experimentation as a research tool and a source of knowledge to establish how we can revamp our gaze regarding co-production techniques. Ingold's notion of inflection, taken from Edward Manning, points out that movements take different paths and are not just a matter of changing rhythms. The mastery of anthropologists stems from their capacity to identify or co-envisage these paths through their bodies, allowing them to cast innovations as improvisation. Inflections supervene the fluxes of energy in the transformation of materials, either in the correct use of a reindeerman's lasso or in the manifold's ways of walking. Nothing ever happens in the same way.

Regarding the philistine attitude advocated by Alfred Gell, it becomes essential to grasp not only the suspension of aesthetic judgment, but also to stress non-verbal knowledge as gestures and body postures. In order to understand abduction as a cognitive process in order to track agency from different sources, anthropologists must synthesize technical expertise, going beyond humans as a source of technical normativity. In this case, philistinism is a potential research tool extending into the non-human domain, especially when it plays a role in shaping certain artifacts such as the canoe prow-board of the Trobriand Islands. Likewise, philistinism serves to gently manipulate underlying experimentation, which must be adequate to anthropologists' ethical commitments. Finally, Malafouris's account (2016) on action possibilities and corporeal affordances prompts cast material objects as a possibilism entangled in social processes, serving as mediators of relationships between people and domains of existence, such as the earthly and the spiritual (Morphy, 2010).

These three proposals show strong resonances regarding methodological insights from the French tradition of the anthropology of technique, such as operational sequence, gestures and rhythms (Leroi-Gourhan, 1989). We argue that if we consider inflection, philistinism, and material affordances as valuable methodological insights, it is possible to characterize a co-production of techniques within broad ethnographic settings. This movement has some important implications. For British anthropology of technology, it overcomes the illusory boundary between action and the external character of artifacts, as well as situates the descriptive character of technical processes (Coupayé, 2015). For the French tradition of anthropology of technique, it allows us to address the co-production of techniques beyond technogenesis (Parente, 2007).

This synthesis could be influential in renewing of understanding of ethnographic setting forward techniques as key to understanding cultural practices. For example, within Mesoamerican ethnographies, techniques often have been associated with strategies related to the economy as hunting and horticulture

practices, either related to the social organization or coordination of work (Galinier, 2009). However, other approaches focus on ritual practices emphasize people's singing, dancing, and other performative techniques, confronting the researcher's role (Neurath, 2014; Pitrou, 2011).

According to Johannes Neurath (2014) in his research about a Mexican Indigenous group called *Wirrarika*, the role of the researcher becomes problematic when they cannot gain access into the realm of specific ritual practices involving prohibited or potentially dangerous objects. In different combinations of ritual gifts such as bows and arrows, these offerings evoke ancestral and natural persons in different settings. While bows concern reciprocal relations, arrows embrace violent actions and free gifts. Both artifacts are intertwined in the coexistence of ritual intentions that are often contradictory.

It is worth pointing out that the manufacture of arrows plays an essential role in ritual and pleas in the form of singing. While both procedures involve techniques, Neurath describes arrows in terms of design and the color red or blue. Meanwhile, the importance of pleas is captured only indirectly through exegesis, myths, and stamen tables, since it is forbidden to record these performances. Here is where methodological experimentation resonates with inflection, philistinism, and material affordances, especially when we realize different operational sequences preceding the individuation of arrows disposed of for ritual offerings or the different rhythms and fluxes in underlying pleas beyond linguistic translation. This movement requires us to expand our understanding towards non-linear operational sequences.

Considering these methodological insights enables the researcher to overcome interpretative exercises due to the impossibility of recording some images, dances, or pleas. Therefore, notions such as inflection, philistinism, and material affordances acquire great importance. For example, inflections identify essential changes in operational sequences. Regarding the manufacture of arrows, Olivia Kindl (2001) describes a complex configuration of arrows composed of several items, such as a *tiskiri* or a hexagonal figure representing the sacred geography, a *nama* or an ancestral bed, pieces of cardboard, and cords akin to those employed in deer hunting. Nevertheless, there are innumerable inflections that are unregistered in these ethnographic settings.

If we take into account a broader notion of operational sequences (i.e. a *chaîne opératoire*) recovering non-linear segments of technical processes, these missing aspects could be tracked along multiple paths. However, it is necessary to stress that many of these elements remain, at first glance, invisible to ethnographical gaze, in part because they belong to other social domains, but at the same time constitute technical processes. The components of these segments remains hidden if the ethnographer persists in exclusively recording direct actions upon matter. According to Ludovic Coupayé (2015), the link between actions on matter and other components from political and cultural domains depends on the systemic character of the *chaîne opératoire* conceived as a transect within the entanglement of social life.

As a transect, the *chaîne opératoire* thus constitutes a valuable methodological device rendering visible those human and more-than human components embedded in an artifact. It is important to note that the transect delineates more than a physical space, including technogenesis, isolated elements and the artifacts themselves, It could thus be said that transect evoke an ecology of practices. Moreover, since this characterization of the transect involves contingencies (and contingencies are essential to experimentation), the *chaîne opératoire* prompts novel ways of co-production of techniques.

Hence, the complexity of arrow manufacture is not confined to representations, nor does magic emanate from an object once people manufacture it. These objects are also manifest in inflections from levels of individuation to subjectification. Even in the ontogenetic process of individuation (i.e. pre-individuation processes), one can find social components insofar as the pre-being of an artifact is necessarily more than one thing, lacking unity and identity (Simondon, 2007). To address pre-individuation processes through a transect allow us to expand technogenesis underlying *chaîne opératoire* as coproduced by heterogeneous elements.

Outbreaking methodological resonances within the coproduction of techniques pushes anthropologists to sink into the ritual without depriving it of its hidden power. Likewise, co-production embraces a double task of recording and conceptualizing relations between and among techniques based on fieldwork, resulting in a corporeal turn encouraging an entanglement of sources of agency.

We suggest focusing on participant observation beyond the mere recording of human activity on matter, attending to the whole process of engaging with materials and their acquisition, origin, historicity, and the learning processes involved. Even at the level of action on matter, imitation is a starting point to figure out the difficulties people confront, considering the possible obsolescence of certain materials, or to envisage to what extent modern technologies allow people to innovate or forget traditional techniques.

Although the notion of coproduction stems from recursiveness (or the feedback loop between ethnographic materials and analytical resources), it also encompasses the notion of co-production in STS literature about how scientific ideas often associated with technological artifacts evolve together with the discourses and institutions that give practical effect to objects (Jasanoff, 2004). This last reflection leads us to think that the relationality underlying the co-production of techniques also resonates beyond anthropology to a sociological domain.

## Conclusions

We have established a contrast between contemporary approaches to objects from the perspective of the ontological turn and early accounts of the technological phenomenon from the anthropology of technology and anthropology of technique. Considering the methodological axis of the ontological turn, we saw that this perspective promoted an intensification of earlier anthropological concerns through three stances: reflexivity, conceptualization, and experimentation.

Moreover, we retrieved this methodological version of the ontological turn in terms of a posthumanist approach to objects. On the one hand, this opposes the alleged humanist approach to objects; on the other hand, we suggested framing experimentation within a mediation approach to delineate a path towards the co-production of techniques.

We first retrieved proposals conceived as alternatives to cultural representation-based accounts in treating objects and material things. Besides criticizing the conception of objects as residual to culture and the modernist bias of the distinction between mind and matter, these proposals appear as precursors of the ontological turn. Later, we exposed independent intellectual genealogies in French anthropology of technique and British anthropology of technology, the former taking as a point of departure the pioneering work of Leroi Gouhran.

We suggested a partial convergence between Lemonnier's account and Pfaffenberger's approaches to symbols, ritual, and power (i.e. technological choices and sociotechnical systems). In the case of Lemonnier, the account was valuable since he stressed technical stances such as operational sequences, rhythms, and fluxes. Unlike Lemonnier, Pfaffenberger's account characterized the technological phenomenon as a text, and his focus on dramas inspired by Victor Turner touched upon most power relations in terms of discourses. His approach had the virtue of situating silence as a non-verbal resource within the ethnographic description.

Further on, we discussed three recent proposals from the British anthropological tradition that grappled with the technological phenomenon. This was related to methodological aspects of mediation: Alfred Gell's abduction of agency, Tim Ingold's ecology of materials, and Lambros Malafouris' Material Engagement Theory. Even though these approaches do not provide a homogeneous framework related to techniques and technology, we stressed the methodological they bring up (such as philistinism, inflection, and material affordances) as items that resonate with experimentation as research tools and sources of knowledge.

We established that these three proposals showed strong resonances regarding methodological insights in the French tradition of anthropology of technique, such as operational sequence, gestures, and rhythms. We argued that if inflection, philistinism, and material affordances result in valuable methodological insights, it is possible to characterize a co-production of techniques within broad ethnographic settings. We oriented these methodological stances toward the notion of a *chaîne opératoire* that moves beyond linear sequences of action on matter. We retrieved the characterization of Ludovic Coupayé of the *chaîne opératoire* as a transect constituted by heterogeneous elements within the entanglement of social life.

We addressed these proposals to account for a recombinant anthropology of technology in the light of the ontological turn's concerns. We showed how it could be possible to revamp an artifactual production approach that takes methodological concerns seriously, such as the co-production of techniques within anthropological research. We concluded by discussing the resonances of these concepts in the light of recent Mesoamerican ethnography, especially that accomplished by Johannes Neurath with indigenous people in West Mexico.

Looking at ritual practices that involve arrows and bows, we stressed to what extent philistinism, inflection, and material affordances can illuminate how an ethnographer could register the complexity of ritual arrows beyond their designs and colors. Specifically, inflection points out operational sequences beyond the manufacture of arrows, distinguishing levels of pre-individuation (*sensu* Simondon, 2007) and proper subjectification; this is when images and objects gain power and volition: agency. At a more basic level, we stressed some important implications resulting from taking into account these methodological resonances. We showed how these could impact upon a British anthropology of technology by overcoming the illusory boundary between action and the external character of artifacts, as well as situating the descriptive character of the technical. We also showed how, for the French tradition of anthropology of technique, these implications allow one to address the co-production of techniques moving beyond technogenesis.

We think that the co-production of techniques is valuable for two reasons. The first concerns overcoming difficulties such as those reported by Johannes Neurath and others related to the ban on recording specific ceremonies or rituals involving techniques such as singing. To sing involves not only a grammatical discourse as revealed by linguistics, but also relations, tempos and fluxes recorded by ethnographers expanding their research tools. Secondly, this paper tried to reconcile different intellectual genealogies and anthropological traditions instead of opposing them or reformulating a new research agenda as Perig Pitrou does (2016). Also, insofar as the co-production of techniques retrieves earlier efforts to focus upon objects in relational terms, they attenuate extreme versions of posthumanism in anthropology.

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# Tensions between universality and equity in the access of racialised immigrants to the SUS in the metropolis of São Paulo during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

This article presents data from an engaged ethnography conducted on political movements of immigrants in the city of São Paulo between 2020 and 2023. I initially analyse the vaccination campaign against COVID-19 among immigrants living in the peripheries of São Paulo, seeking to demonstrate that undocumented status had a limited effect on difficulties in accessing the right to healthcare, highlighting that even immigrants who had documents – and who were, for all intents and purposes, legally Brazilian – were unable to get vaccinated. Thus, I argue that racialisation processes are more decisive than undocumented status in defining who is eligible to access to that which is considered universal. The second argumentative axis reflects on the guiding paradigms of Brazil's Unified Health System (SUS), and on the tensions observed in the discourses of certain actors involved in disputes in the field of healthcare, between the principles of universality and equity in the face of demands of certain specific health promotion actions for migrant populations. The paradigms of universality and equity are therefore considered mutually exclusive rather than complementary by these actors.

**Key words:** SUS, immigrants, universality, equity, racialisation.



# Tensões entre universalidade e equidade no acesso de imigrantes racializados ao SUS na metrópole paulistana durante a pandemia de Covid-19

## Resumo

Este artigo apresenta dados de uma etnografia engajada conduzida junto a movimentos políticos de imigrantes da cidade de São Paulo entre os anos de 2020 e 2023. Analiso, inicialmente, a campanha de vacinação contra a Covid-19 entre imigrantes moradores das periferias de São Paulo, procurando demonstrar que a indocumentação teve efeito limitado sobre as dificuldades de acesso ao direito à saúde, apontando que mesmo imigrantes que possuíam documentos - e que por vezes eram, para todos os efeitos, legalmente brasileiros - não conseguiam se vacinar. Assim, argumento que os processos de racialização são mais determinantes que a indocumentação para definição de quem será elegível para o acesso ao que é considerado universal. O segundo eixo argumentativo reflete sobre os paradigmas orientadores do Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS), e sobre as tensões, observadas nos discursos de determinados atores envolvidos nas disputas do campo da saúde, entre os princípios da universalidade e da equidade face às demandas de estruturação de determinadas ações de promoção de saúde específicas para as populações migrantes. Os paradigmas da universalidade e da equidade são, assim, considerados antes como mutuamente excludentes do que como complementares por tais atores.

**Palavras-chave:** SUS, imigrantes, universalidade, equidade, racialização.

# Tensions between universality and equity in the access of racialised immigrants to the SUS in the metropolis of São Paulo during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup>

Alexandre Branco-Pereira

## Introduction

(...) And so we continue. It is the time of crutches.  
The time of the talking dead  
and paralysed old women, nostalgic for dancing,  
but there is still time to live and tell.  
Certain stories have not been lost.<sup>2</sup>  
Carlos Drummond de Andrade, *Nosso Tempo*, 1945

It was a sultry, rainy spring day in the city of São Paulo, and migrants from different national origins crowded together on chairs under a marquee in Guaianases, a neighbourhood in city's easternmost region. At the front, a line of migrant rights activists, including myself, directed them to different types of immigration regulation assistance services and to the team from the territory's *Unidade Básica de Saúde* (UBS) [Primary Healthcare Centre], which was performing vaccination against COVID-19 on site. 'Are you asking for a CPF<sup>3</sup> to get vaccinated?' I was asked by a Bolivian woman who I was signing up to take her first dose of vaccine. 'No', I replied, since this was the first and only specific action to immunise immigrants in Brazil not requiring the presentation of Brazilian documents or documents within the period of validity. 'Then I'll get it', she replied.

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2 From the poem 'Nosso Tempo' [Our Time] (1945). '(...) E continuamos. / É tempo de muletas. / Tempo de mortos faladores / e velhas paráliticas, nostálgicas de bailado. / mas ainda é tempo de viver e contar. / Certas histórias não se perderam.' Free translation by Philip Badiz.

3 A CPF number is an individual taxpayer registry attributed by the Brazilian Federal Revenue to Brazilians and migrants who pay taxes in Brazil. It is relatively easy to apply for and to be issued a CPF number, even though during the pandemic the application process, to be made exclusively online, got more difficult and intricate. Moreover, immigrants who got into the country after the closing of the borders were not allowed to apply for a CPF number or any other sort of regularisation, as we will see.

This episode occurred on 30 November, 2021, three months after the announcement made by the São Paulo municipal administration that 100% of the city's adult population had been administered at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. On 25 November of the same year, the city also announced that all adults had completed their vaccination cycle, at the time consisting of two doses of vaccines produced by the laboratories AstraZeneca, Pfizer, Sinovac and Sputnik V (for some Brazilian states only), or a dose of the vaccine produced by the Janssen laboratory. However, this woman and 91 other immigrants who attended the series of three collective actions, mostly identified as Indigenous and Black, from Latin American and African countries, were administered the first dose of their vaccines only at this event, which further vaccinated 14 immigrants with their second dose and 1 with the third dose.

This article presents data from an engaged ethnography (Kirsch 2018; Ortner 2019) conducted with political movements of migrants and Brazilian allies in the city of São Paulo between 2020 and 2023. Between 2019 and 2022, I was part of the collegiate coordination of the *Rede de Cuidados em Saúde para Imigrantes e Refugiados* [Healthcare Network for Immigrants and Refugees], or simply the *Rede* [Network], a collective that at the time brought together more than 40 services and organisations that provide healthcare to immigrants in the city of São Paulo. As the pandemic situation worsened, I was invited to participate in several spaces to debate on possible emergency responses to the pandemic aimed specifically at migrant populations residing in the city. My growing political involvement with the demand for the development of equity actions within the *Sistema Único de Saúde* (SUS) [Unified Health System] and with the request for information on contagion and deaths of immigrants due to the disease presented me with abundant data on the impact of the pandemic on these populations in São Paulo, and in Brazil as a whole. Officially, I was more circumscribed by the fieldwork than I initiated it, figuring as a key articulator for the organisation of the events described here in collaboration with migrant political movements. Often acting as a mediator between such movements and state agents, I did not close ranks with my interlocutors exclusively for research purposes, but rather conducted research based on prior political and professional activities.

The article is based on two argumentative axes. The first is based on an analysis of the vaccination campaign against COVID-19. After describing how immigrants living in neighbourhoods in the easternmost region of the city of São Paulo were denied access to the vaccine, I seek to demonstrate that undocumented status has a limited effect on difficulties in accessing the right to healthcare, highlighting that even immigrants who had documents – and who were, for all intents and purposes, legally Brazilian – were unable to get vaccinated. Thus, I argue that the processes of racialisation, understood here as the processes through which any social difference is essentialised, naturalised and/or biologised, anchoring them in fixed types of otherness (Omi & Winant 1994; Vertovec 2011; Thomas & Clarke 2013), are more decisive than lack of documentation in defining who is eligible for access to what is considered universal.

The second argumentative axis reflects on the guiding paradigms of the SUS, and on the tensions between the principles of universality and equity frequently observed in the discourses of some actors in the face of demands for structuring certain specific health promotion actions for migrant populations. Even though they are complementary paradigms – it is only possible to guarantee the universality of the system through diligent observation of the inequities that constitute Brazilian society –, I seek to demonstrate that the existence of certain actions aimed at producing equity in the SUS are often qualified as creating privileges in a context of the scarcity of the right to healthcare. Thus, actions to mitigate the effects produced by these inequalities are classified as threats to equality – of rights and before the law – as is the case with other similar actions, such as affirmative actions. The paradigms of universality and equity are, therefore, considered by certain actors present in disputes specific to the health field as mutually exclusive rather than complementary. The first section is dedicated to a brief theoretical analysis of the tensions between universal, particular and equitable, and then I move on to discussions raised by the presentation of ethnographic data.

## Of the universal and the particular, or of the equitable

The universal-particular dyad is a classic object of anthropology and social sciences. A by-product of the modern episteme, the idea of universality formed the basis of the epistemological construction efforts of anthropology by raising the category of humanity, of ‘universal’ scope, linear and relatively uniform development, and often averse to contextualisations. Even though ethnocentrism may be the most universal of human characteristics, as Lévi-Strauss (1966) affirmed, the articulation between the notion of humanity and the notion of universality presents itself as a diacritical trait of thought attributed to the macroblock that is commonly called ‘Western culture’ (Santos 1997). Modern notions of humanity and universality are associated through the attribution of universally shared basic characteristics that symmetrise everyone individually and collectively, supporting, among other things, the structuring of policies guaranteeing human rights – notoriously restrictive regarding what rights are guaranteed to which humans (Id. *Ibid.*).

As so-called critical studies and perspectivism demonstrate, access to the – universal – status of humanity that is worthy of rights no longer encompasses a myriad of subjects and creatures considered infra- or non-human. Feminist, anti-racist, decolonial studies and perspectivism have demonstrated that the failure to guarantee access to certain life possibilities for certain populations was closely linked to the greater or lesser consideration of those affected communities as equals – that is, as holders of rights with respect to state structures or certain relationships (Gonzalez 1984; Césaire 2004; Fanon 2008; Braidotti 2019; Kilomba 2019; Krenak 2020). The category ‘humanity’ is not only not universal – it is culturally specific –, but it is also an index of access to power (Braidotti 2019). Thus, access to the status of this universal humanity whose rights are ensured becomes a central political agenda, since the club of humanity is not open to everyone (Krenak 2020). Particular universalities are thus created, capable of simultaneously advocating the inclusion of all subjects and excluding certain groups incapable of fulfilling all the criteria of humanity stipulated by such situated perspectives.

If the representation of the universal-particular dyad in two diametrically opposed and exclusive poles is illusory, in addition to analytically and empirically unproductive precisely because it establishes distinctions between the two poles – that are often hybrid, fractal, use disparate scales and in which dividing lines are blurred and highly permeable (Santos 1997; Viveiros de Castro 2002) –, its presence is especially felt in the nebulous zones of epistemological and/or ontological interstice (Viveiros de Castro 2015). In the field of health, the dyad is often represented, on the one hand, by fields of knowledge that deal with structural, material and objective components of reality – universalisable components immune to contextualisation –, and on the other, by those that deal with symbolic and accessory superstructures, whose only universal property is variability – cultures, societies, meanings attributed to a structural external world<sup>4</sup>. Social scientists – and even psychologists and psychiatrists – are often faced with the task of having to repeatedly prove the relevance of socio-historical-cultural factors in health approaches (Carvalho et al., *in press*), and are often instrumentalised as devices to reduce resistance in communities that clinicians, public health professionals and epidemiologists want to access.

Later I discuss how this dyad is operationalised in disputes in the health field as mutually exclusive: ultimately, it is not possible for some actors in this field to conceptualise a universal healthcare system when the contexts are considered. On the one hand, from this perspective, considering the contexts creates segregation and exclusion and enormous potential for deepening racism and xenophobia, since it enables the creation of differentiated treatments for certain social groups. On the other hand, it creates privileges, because based on

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<sup>4</sup> In this second field, I also include extra-modern ontological and epistemological matrices, all reduced to imaginative fictions over an immanent, measurable world. It is no coincidence that neo-positivism and neo-enlightenment are found to be greatly strengthened following the COVID-19 pandemic.

the perspective of a scarcity of rights, in which a large portion of the population experiences severe difficulties regarding access, creating actions to reduce inequality for certain social groups produces greater inequality by privileging access for some to the detriment of other marginalised groups. Thus, equity actions – the equalisation of certain aspects of interventions, whether for public or individual healthcare, in order to reduce inequalities derived from differences of a diverse nature, establishing close and symmetrical dialogue with other knowledges and therapeutic systems – always have to be reduced to the minimum under the threat of compromising said universality, whether that of the system or of ‘evidence-based medicine’ and its object.

I now present an analysis of the ethnographic data, seeking to demonstrate that the vaccination campaign against COVID-19 in Brazil, specifically in the metropolitan region of São Paulo, also obeyed this logic.

### **‘Laws are not enough. (...)’<sup>5</sup>**

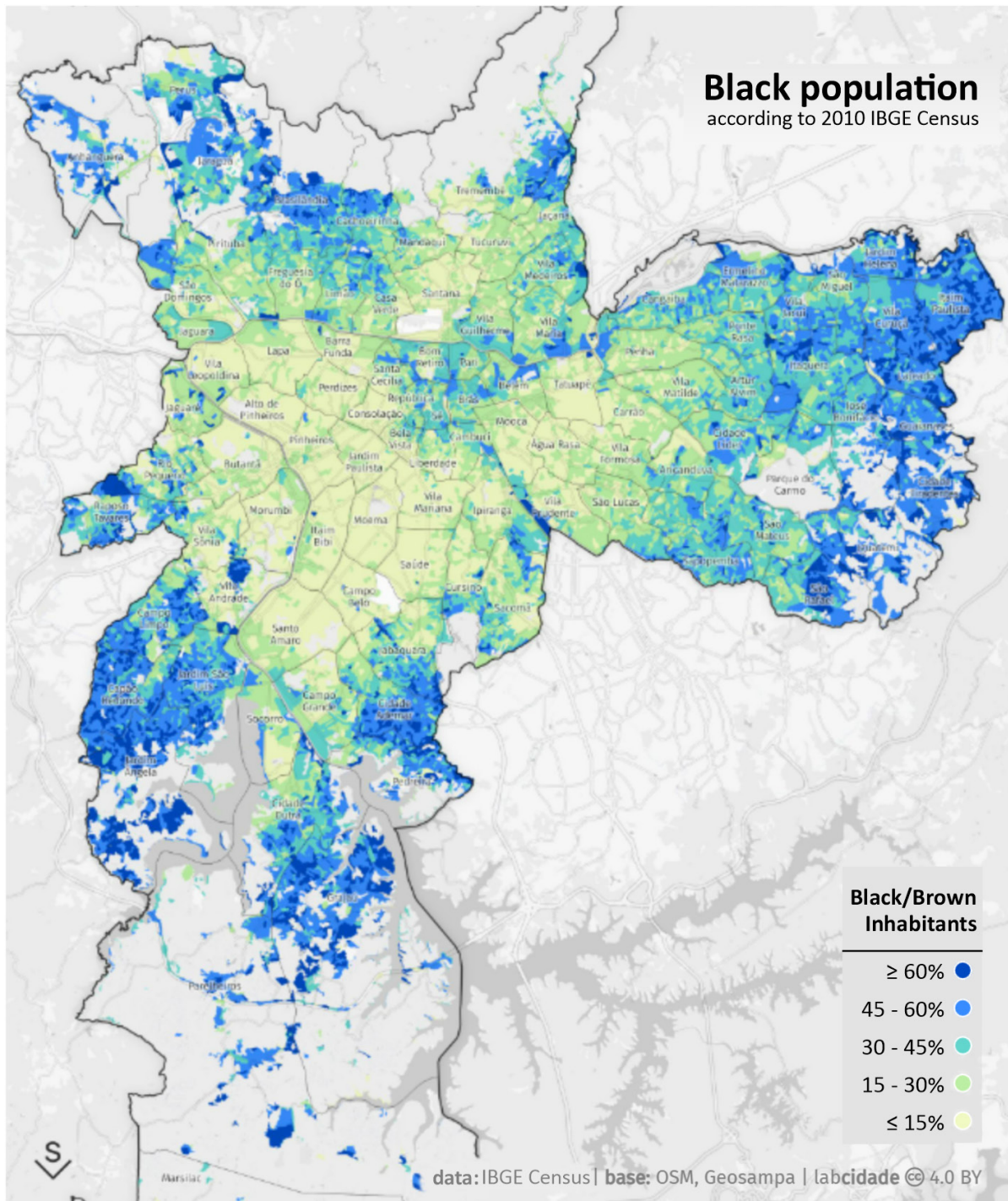
In Brazil, 2021 began with the promise of an inclusive, comprehensive vaccination campaign: on 17 January, Mônica Calazans, a Black nurse who worked at Emílio Ribas Hospital, was immunised in the presence of the governor of São Paulo, João Doria, a few minutes after the approval of the emergency use of vaccines from the Sinovac (CoronaVac) and AstraZeneca (Covishield) laboratories by the *Agência Nacional de Vigilância Sanitária* (ANVISA) [Brazilian Health Surveillance Agency]. The choice of a Black woman was made to symbolise the inclusive nature of the upcoming vaccination campaign: Mônica was a resident of Itaquera, a low-income, easternmost district of São Paulo, and had worked as a nurse at two jobs since 1985. The event became a platform for political affirmation of the ‘triumph of life against denialism’, in the words of the governor of São Paulo, who sought the endorsement of the PSDB as a candidate for President of the Republic. A year later, Mônica was invited by João Doria to join his party. In 2022, the nurse was a candidate for federal representative and received 9,149 votes, not enough to be elected. João Doria was unable to gain the endorsement as presidential candidate, and left the PSDB in 2022.

What followed did not maintain continuity with the symbolic action in January. In February 2021, research already indicated that the adoption of age criteria to define priority groups, to the detriment of adopting territorial (and, consequently, racial) criteria in the city of São Paulo, meant privileging less vulnerable groups in terms of access to immunisations, directing vaccines to territories where there was no evidence of excess mortality and that had a greater concentration of white and high-income populations (Faustino et al. 2021). Between May and July, with vaccination data already relatively consolidated, data from LabCidade demonstrated that the Black populations in the peripheries of São Paulo were simultaneously those who died the most and were vaccinated more slowly, even when considering groups eligible for vaccination at the time (Marino et al. 2021; Mazza 2021; Ziegler 2021).

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<sup>5</sup> ‘As leis não bastam. (...)’ Excerpt from *Nosso Tempo* (1945) by Carlos Drummond de Andrade.

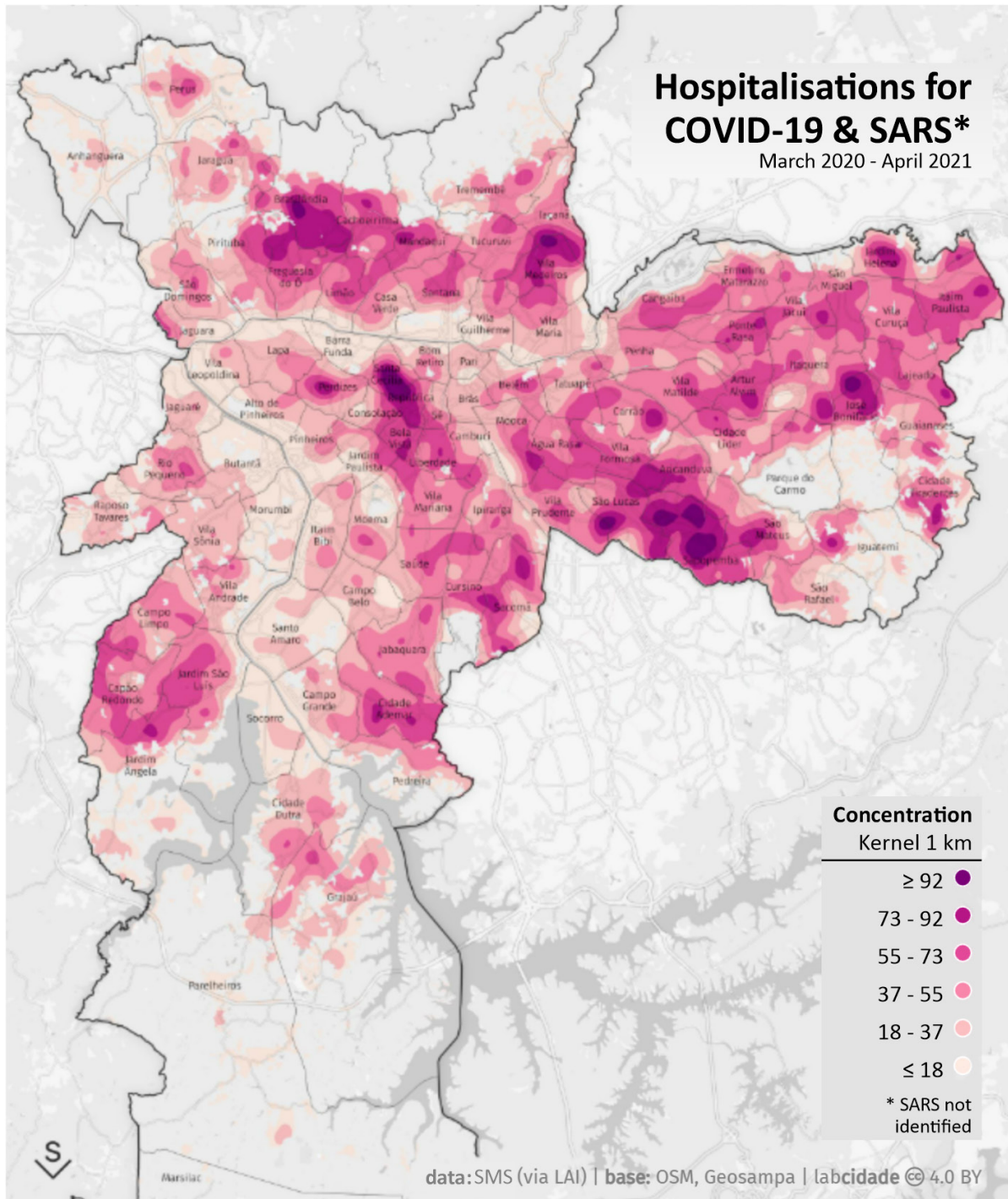
**Figure 1.** Distribution of the Black population in the city of São Paulo, according to the 2010 Census (self-declared Black or Brown). Map prepared by LabCidade (Marino et al. 2021).



**Figure 2.**

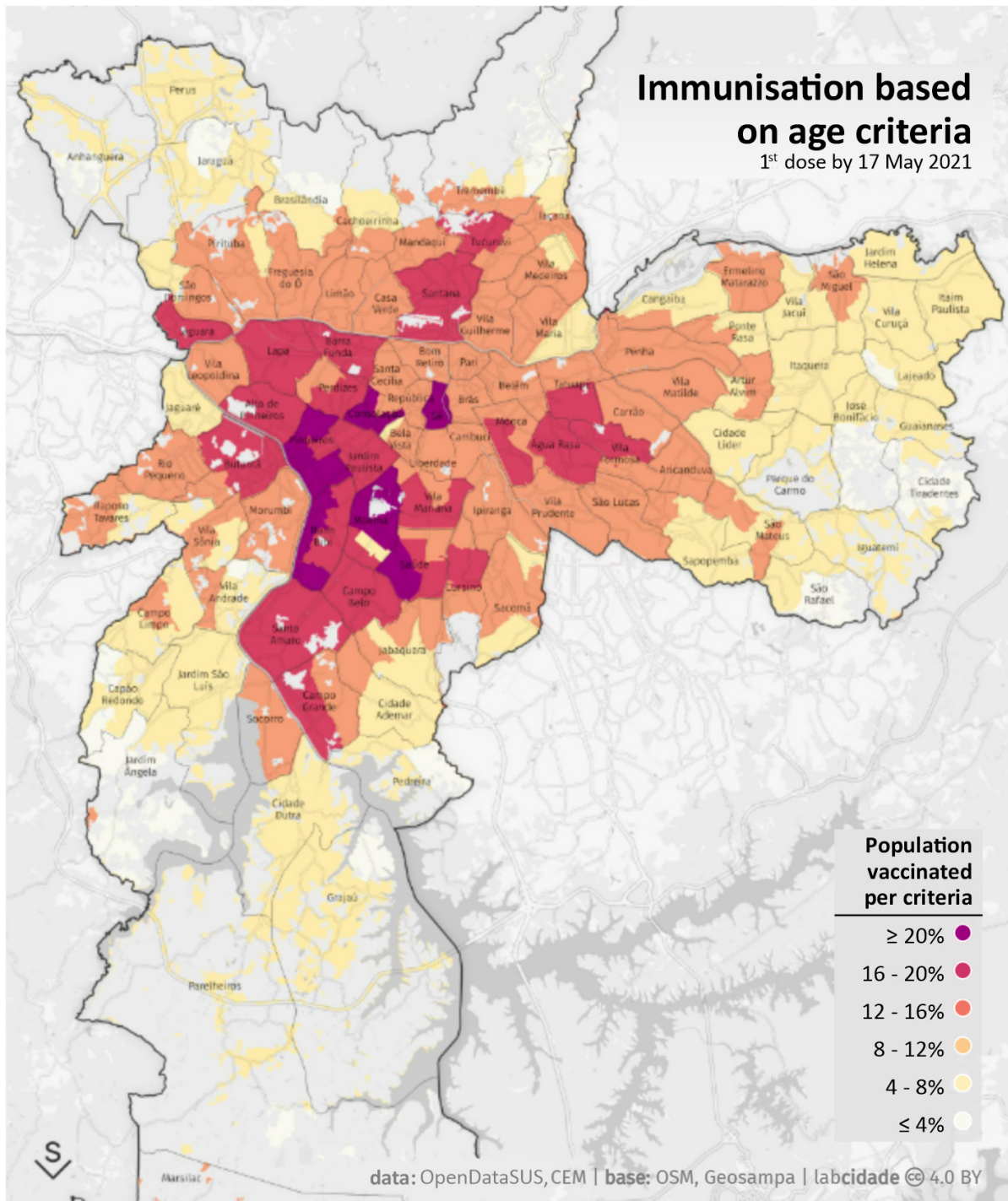
Heat map representing the concentration of hospitalisations due to COVID-19 and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in the city of São Paulo between March 2020 and April 2021.

Map prepared by LabCidade (Marino et al. 2021).

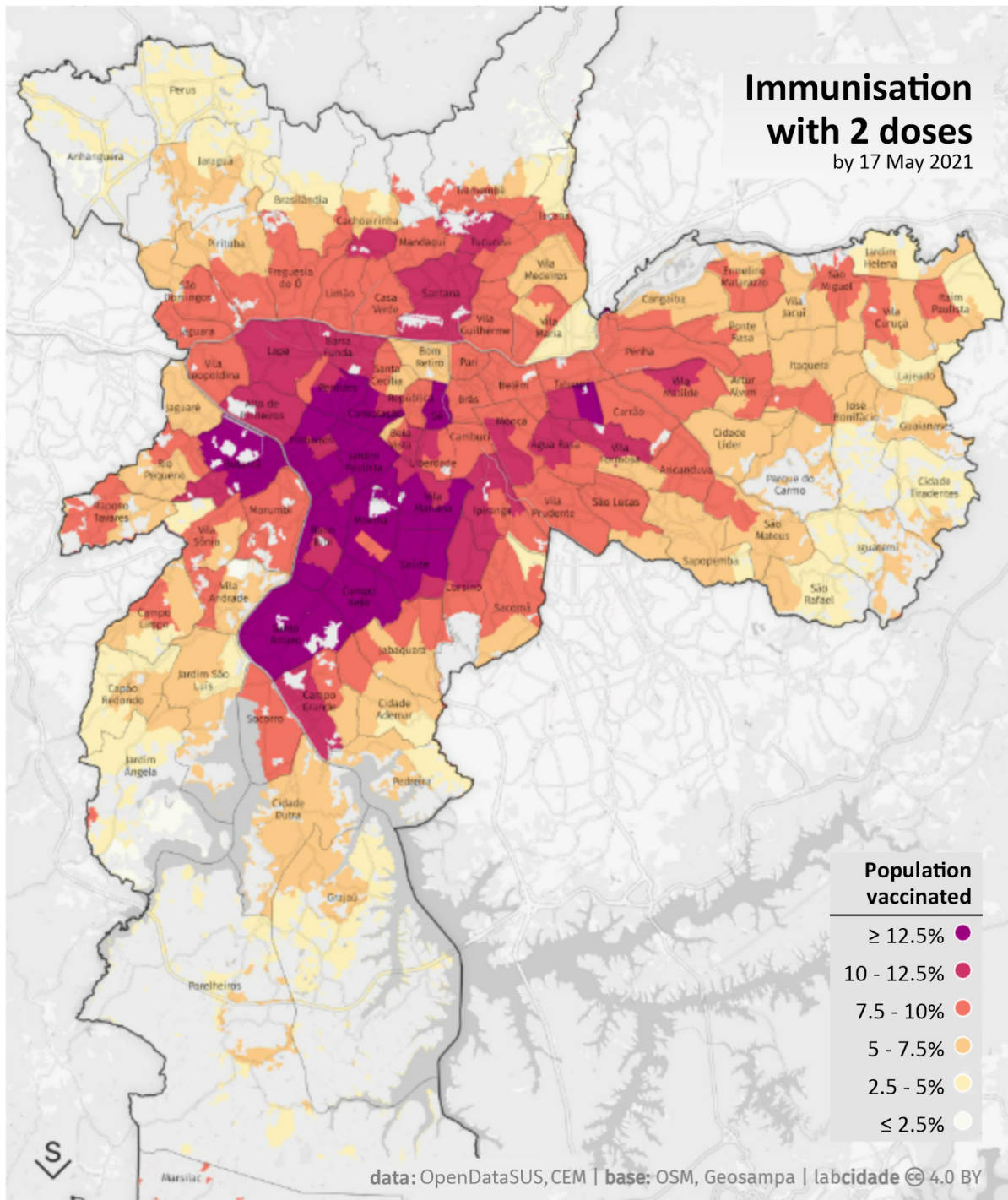




**Image 3.** Population vaccinated with one dose based on age criteria by 17 May 2021 in the city of São Paulo. Map prepared by LabCidade (Marino et al. 2021).



**Figure 4.** Distribution of the population immunised with two doses by 17 May 2021 in the city of São Paulo. Map prepared by LabCidade (Marino et al. 2021).



Since the onset of the campaign, the presentation of certain documents, such as a CPF and proof of residence, had been mandatory for vaccination in São Paulo and in most of the country. This document, and any other, is officially waived by several laws and other normative instruments: in the 5<sup>th</sup> article, the Federal Constitution affirms the equality of all before the law without distinction of any kind (Brasil 1988); Articles 1 and 7 of Law no. 8080/90 affirm universal access to the SUS at all levels of care, and section IV of Article 7 also affirms equal healthcare, without prejudice or privileges of any kind (Brasil 1990); Article 4 of Law no. 13.445/17 guarantees immigrants access to public health, social assistance and social security services without discrimination based on nationality and migratory status (Brasil 2017); Article 258 of Ministry of Health Ordinance no. 2.236/21 states that the identification of people will be waived when it is impossible to obtain data that guarantees their unique identification, like in cases of persons incapacitated for social and cultural reasons (Brasil 2021); Article 13 of Ministry of Health Ordinance no. 940/11 states that the non-existence or absence of a *Cartão Nacional de Saúde* (CNS) [National Health Card], lack of knowledge of a person's CNS number or the impossibility of registering or consulting the *Base Nacional de Dados dos Usuários das Ações e Serviços de Saúde* [National Database of Users of Health Actions and Services] (Brasil 2011) do not constitute impediments to the provision of requested care in any healthcare establishment.

On 28 May, 2021, the municipality of São Paulo began to require compulsory presentation of proof of residence to perform the first dose of vaccination within the municipal public healthcare network. The measure was adopted due to the progressive reduction in the age range of the population eligible for immunisation. Given the shortage of doses, it was necessary to channel vaccines to residents, preventing people from other cities from going to São Paulo to be immunised – violating equity, universality, and the structuring of the health system as nationally unified. Here I highlight an article on the subject published on the São Paulo City Council page, where it is stated that the city had been the only one – among how many or which towns or cities was not specified – until that moment that it had not made such a demand, ‘complying with all the rules of SUS’ (Monteiro 2021). The statement recognised, therefore, that the requirement was contrary to SUS regulations. The sole paragraph of Article 19 of the Law no. 13.714/18, for example, says:

Comprehensive healthcare, including the dispensing of medicines and products of interest to health, to families and individuals in situations of vulnerability or social and personal risk, under the terms of this law, will take place regardless of the presentation of documents proving domicile or registration in the Unified Health System (SUS), in line with the guidelines for articulating social and healthcare actions referred to in section XII of this article. (Brasil 2018)

However, cases of refusal of care and vaccination of immigrants in the municipality were not rare due to immigrants being unable to present documents, whether a CPF or proof of residence. In some cases, even with valid documents, immigrants were prevented from being vaccinated against COVID-19. In relation to the CPF, it must be said that Brazil experienced the establishment of a policy of producing undocumented status coupled with the coronavirus pandemic. Borders began to be closed following Ordinance no. 120/20, published on March 17, 2020, and the measure was re-issued in more than thirty other ordinances that followed it, with land borders remaining closed until December 2021. Thus, any immigrant who entered the country after this date did so via clandestine routes, and was formally prevented from regularising – that is, from requesting a CPF, opening a bank account, registering children born in Brazil, requesting a work permit, and, of course, from entering into formal rental contracts or any other type of consumer relationship that provided some proof of residence.

On 1 July, 2021, a meeting was held between the *Rede*, immigrant movements and the *Coordenadoria de Políticas para Migrantes e Promoção do Trabalho Decente* (CPMigTD) [Coordination of Policies for Migrants and Promotion of Decent Work] in the city of São Paulo. The meeting was intended to discuss the problems faced by immigrants living in São Paulo when getting vaccinated. The CPMigTD coordinator at the time stated that, despite the document requirements formalised in instructions released by the *Secretaria Municipal de Saúde* (SMS-SP) [Municipal Health Secretariat], no difficulties were being reported in vaccinating immigrants. He stated that he was aware that UBSs in the city centre were accepting handwritten declarations from occupation leaders as proof of residence, in the case of those immigrants who lived in occupations of housing movements, and that he would check with SMS-SP if there were complaints about denials of access to the vaccine registered with the municipality's SUS Ombudsman's Office. On July 7, the coordinator sent an email saying that SMS-SP had stated that there were no records of reports or complaints from immigrants regarding denial of access to vaccination at the SUS Ombudsman's Office.

Even though, as we saw above, the lack of documents alone was not be enough to bar access to vaccination against COVID-19 considering the laws that deal with the subject, or that there were no official records of denial of vaccines, which was enough for the authorities to ignore the problem, Yoselin<sup>6</sup>, a Bolivian woman who was pregnant at the time she became eligible for immunisation, could not get vaccinated. She was living at a friend's house as a favour, in the easternmost region of São Paulo, on the division with the city of Ferraz de Vasconcelos, and was not vaccinated against COVID-19 since she did not have proof of residence in her name. Yoselin was a member of the *Associação de Mulheres Imigrantes Luz e Vida* (AMILV) [Light and Life Immigrant Women's Association], a collective of Bolivian, Paraguayan, Venezuelan and Brazilian women who approached the *Rede* through the *Fórum Fontié ki Kwaze - Fronteiras Cruzadas* [Fontié ki Kwaze Forum – Traversed Borders] to denounce the denial of vaccination to immigrants in the peripheries of São Paulo. Yolanda, one of the leaders of AMILV, explains:

I had to really fight to get my SUS card. At the healthcare centre, they ask for a Brazilian document and proof of residence. There are people who have to go to the owner of the house to register, because there is nothing in their name. In Vila Yolanda II and Cidade Tiradentes, many women go, but they don't want to attend us. There are people who ask me: 'Do I need a document? A CPF?', and what can I say? There are people who don't know that they can get the SUS card without the RNM [National Migration Registry], they say 'but I don't have a CPF', so they can't get vaccinated. (Field record, 12 July, 2021)

Samuel is a naturalised Brazilian, but he was born in Haiti. Legally, he is a Brazilian citizen, and as such, he had documents from the country, but he was unable to transfer ownership of the house bills into his name for a property rented directly from the owner. Samuel also tried to get vaccinated at two different UBSs, one in Ferraz de Vasconcelos and the other in Guaianases, the latter in the city of São Paulo. He was unable to do so, and had to return to in-person work in August 2021 without being administered a single dose of vaccine, even though he was eligible.

Look, it was difficult. It was very difficult. I went to Ferraz, and they wouldn't let me [get vaccinated] there because I didn't have proof in my name. In Guaianases, it was the same thing. At the time my age started to get vaccinated, I was still working from home, teaching French and English online. But then the school said that we were going to go back to teaching at the school, so, right? Then I needed to be vaccinated. (Field record, 11 September, 2021)

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6 The names of certain individuals and interlocutors were changed to protect the identity and privacy of those concerned.

Martin was a Venezuelan living in the Tiquatira neighbourhood, the East Zone of São Paulo. He came to the city after spending time in Roraima. When trying to get vaccinated for the first time, at the beginning of September, Martin presented the asylum request protocol, a Brazilian document, but was denied the vaccine: ‘the nurse looked at it and said only with a CPF, and that I also needed some proof of residence, electricity bill, water bill’, he says. Days later, now in possession of his CPF and an electricity bill in his parents’ name, he received a second denial, now claiming that to be vaccinated he needed a RNM [National Migration Registry] with a current expiration date.

The last two cases are especially emblematic as a means of highlighting that undocumented status in and of itself does not result in the denial of access to rights. Although exemption from the mandatory presentation of valid Brazilian documents is an important instrument for constructing equal access, something already provided for in law, this is systematically ignored by health teams and public managers. Even when racialised immigrants – some naturalised and legally Brazilian – residents from the peripheries of São Paulo or its metropolitan interstices – the nebulous borders between the conurbation of municipalities – had the requested documents, they were unable to get vaccinated, and no official records of such denials were produced. Universality imposed access rules based on the presentation of documents, but demanded it unequally from the population served, greatly impacting racialised subjects living in the peripheries – many of whom were Black and Indigenous immigrants.

### **‘(...) Lilies are not born from laws.’<sup>7</sup>**

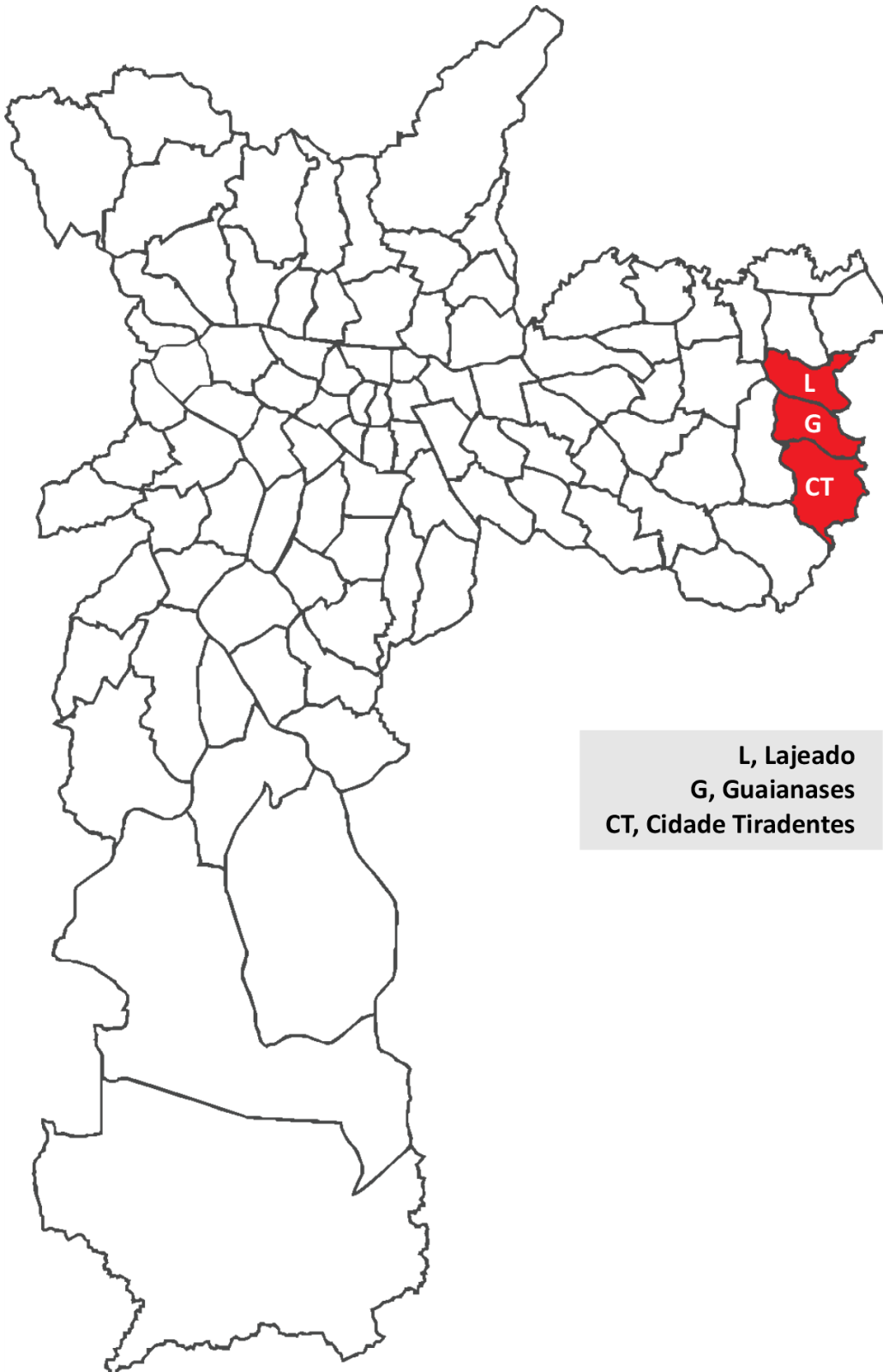
With the exception of Yolanda, all the immigrants whose statements were described above were vaccinated in the joint actions carried out by civil society. The events were held in the second half of 2021: the first joint action was on 11 September, the second on 30 October, and the third on 27 November. Coordinating the organisation was the responsibility of the *Rede*, as described above, in partnership with AMILV and the *Fontié ki Kwaze* Forum, a collective of Brazilian and immigrant researchers and activists on human and immigrant rights. Representing the *Rede*, I was responsible for liaising with the *Coordenação de Atenção Básica* [Primary Healthcare Coordination] of the SMS-SP to ensure a health team from the territory’s UBS<sup>8</sup> was available to perform vaccinations against COVID-19 without requiring Brazilian documents or proof of residence, in addition to the creation of a SUS card for all those who were attended.

7 ‘(...) *Os lírios não nascem das leis.*’ Excerpt from the poem *Nosso Tempo* (1945) by Carlos Drummond de Andrade.

8 The Unified Health System (SUS) is territorialised, so districts and neighbourhoods are organised around a reference UBS. An UBS has the responsibility for primary care in a given territory, so if a vaccination action is to take place in that geographical and administrative region, a health team from that UBS must perform that action.

**Figure 5.**

Map of the municipality of São Paulo highlighting the three neighbourhoods where the collective actions took place: Lajeado, on 11 September; Cidade Tiradentes, on 30 October; and Guaianases, on 27 November. Prepared by the author.



The first event was held in the Lajeado neighbourhood, and in addition to the vaccination action, it included immigration regularisation services carried out by the *Defensoria Pública da União* [Federal Public Defender's Office] and ProMigra (an extension project of the Law School of São Paulo University), conversation circles on health, consular services from the Bolivian Consulate, and the *Restabelecimento de Laços Familiares da Cruz Vermelha* [Red Cross Restoring Family Links] service, responsible for locating and connecting family members who have lost contact due to the migration. Two hundred people were attended, including the administration of 38 doses of vaccine against COVID-19, corresponding to 19% of the total population attended.

Conversations with the *Coordenação de Atenção Básica* had begun on August 26, 2021. The coordinator determined that the manager of UBS Jardim Fanganiello [Fanganiello Garden UBS], reference for the territory where the joint action was to be held, had to align directly with the *Rede* concerning the details of the event. From the onset, the organisation of the task force established that the action needed to take place without demanding a CPF or proof of residence – nothing more than what is stated in the legal ordinances that govern attendance in the SUS. Initially, there was agreement, but on 9 September, two days before the joint action, the UBS manager communicated via WhatsApp message that proof of residence would be required as those vaccinated must be residents in the city of São Paulo. They then sent São Paulo City Hall Instruction no. 34, the most updated order dealing with vaccine prioritisation at the time. 'Just don't ask for proof for those who are bedridden', added the manager. I argued that this was one of the main reasons why immigrants were not getting vaccinated. A few minutes later, the *Supervisora Técnica de Saúde* [Technical Health Supervisor] for the Guaianases region, who coordinates the work of all health centres in the territory, called me and informed me that the vaccination action would be cancelled since the UBS was experiencing a lack of vaccine doses.

As a way to reduce animosity and ensure that the vaccination, which had already been announced, would take place, I went to the UBS with Yolanda, leader of the AMILV, to personally speak with the manager. Following our conversation, it was agreed that vaccination would take place without requiring documents, but only the first dose would be administered so as to prevent too many people from attending the event to get the vaccine, once they found out about the exemption for proof of residence.

The second joint action took place in the Cidade Tiradentes neighbourhood. The healthcare team present was linked to UBS *Nascer do Sol* [Sunrise UBS]. This time, 29 first and 6 second doses were administered, among a total of 180 visits, corresponding to 19.4% of those vaccinated. Approximately 83% of those who were vaccinated at this joint action were initiating their primary vaccination cycle, which took place more than two months after the São Paulo City Council's announcement that the entire vaccinable population at the time was already immunised with at least one dose.

**Figure 6.**

Bolivian Aymara immigrant receives his first dose of the vaccine against COVID-19 during the joint action in the district of Lajeado, 11 September, 2021.  
Photo: André Vito of the Red Cross.



The third joint action took place in the neighbourhood of Guaianases, and provided 112 attendances. Thirteen days before, on 17 November, the government of the state of São Paulo had announced the application of booster doses for adults vaccinated at least five months previously, and so these were also made available. The health team from UBS Jardim Soares [Soares Garden UBS], the reference for the territory, vaccinated 24 people with their first dose, 8 with their second dose and 1 person with their third dose, representing 29.5% of the public present at the joint action – and once again, the majority of those vaccinated at this joint action were administered their first dose, and were therefore completely unprotected until the last two months of 2021.

In total, 106 people were vaccinated, corresponding to 21.5% of the total number of immigrants attended. Of these people, 91 (18.5% of the number of people attended and almost 86% of the vaccinated public) had not taken any dose of the vaccine until they were immunised in the joint actions. It is important to highlight again that the municipality had announced that its entire adult population had been vaccinated with at least one dose on 17 August, one month before the first joint action. The announcement that the entire adult population had completed the vaccination cycle occurred on 25 November, five days before the last joint action. The announcements, which considered the estimated population and cross-referenced this estimate with the number of doses applied, obviously ignored that the racialised immigrant population, with or without documents, was largely *forgotten and lived in continuous oblivion*.

Something never recognised as a real event cannot be erased or forgotten. Likewise, something that has never been recorded cannot be erased. Immigrants are not invisible, since invisibility is a trait attributed to the subject, and the act of imposing oblivion is situated elsewhere, external to immigrant populations. Initially, there is the imposition of a series of requirements designed to attest the real existence of a certain



experience – official records in mostly undisclosed reporting channels, for example –, subsequently allocating the remainder to the field of hallucinations – that is, a false experience that happened only within the minds of people not connected with the material reality of facts. Thus, when the experience leaves the present time, it cannot be remembered as something that already existed, since it was never registered or recognised, but rather hallucinated.

Considering the reflections by Gagnebin (2010) on the Brazilian military dictatorship to engender the notion of forced oblivion, when the state tortures, whether during the military dictatorship or in democratic times, it does not deny the existence of torture, it denies that the suffering imposed on the tortured is harmful, or something that must be avoided. Torture is not something to be erased, but its reasons are subject to dispute, and the state imposes oblivion on specific aspects of history as a way of extorting amnesty for its illegal actions. Thus, those tortured generally become communist terrorists, drug dealers, thieves, and criminals, deserving of that which is attributed to them. The pandemic engendered a similar mechanism: when there is a forgetfulness imposed by the lack of recognition and recording of immigrants' and other marginalised groups' experiences, it is acceptable to celebrate the deaths of unvaccinated people who are considered denialists, not as vulnerable people excluded from that which is considered universal.

Thus, the refusal of imposed forgetfulness, through the articulation of resistance movements, makes it possible to record the experiences of these people as a reality, not as an imagined political fact to be promptly disregarded. The involvement of public power under the terms that it defines for itself, guided by its laws, normative instruments and ordinances, results from an active effort against a structure capable of allocating uncomfortable perspectives of the world to power in the sphere of the hallucinatory (Branco-Pereira 2021). As Gagnebin states:

There seems to be a secret correspondence between the empty places, the holes of memory, these imposed blanks of the unspoken of the past, and the lawless places of the present, spaces of exclusion and exception, but located within the legitimate social locus, as if only the inclusion of the exception could guarantee the security of the social totality. The price of the silence imposed with respect to the past is not 'only' the pain of the survivors: it is also paid for by our resignation and impotence. (Gagnebin 2010, p. 186)

If silence concerning the dead of the past accustoms us to silence concerning the dead of today, it is necessary to move from resignation not only to indignation, but to effective resistance aimed at sabotaging the active mechanisms of erasure. Although these mechanisms can, at times, have retroactive action – as in the cases of extorted reconciliations promoted by dictatorships –, they unfold in the present moment and address populations to be forgotten in the present so that the echoes of their existence, suffering and demands do not resonate. However, their demands are not erased, given they were never registered to begin with. These mechanisms are multifaceted, acting, on the one hand, in a way to deny the recognition of existence to populations whom the state wishes to forget, and, on the other, in a way that once their existence is recognised, fails to meet their demands so that the recognition does not happen under the terms that the population itself wishes to be treated. The next topic aims to detail how the notion of universality of the health system sometimes becomes part of this mechanism of imposed forgetting.

## **Between universality and equity: brief remission, and disputes concerning the SUS**

Another action organised during the pandemic was the *1ª Plenária Nacional sobre Saúde e Migração em Tempos de Covid-19* [I National Plenary on Health and Migration in Times of COVID-19]. With the purpose of being a space for listening and debate between immigrant populations, health professionals and managers, researchers and activists, the I National Plenary was articulated by civil society organisations as a form of combating

‘the systematic invisibilisation and silencing of immigrant populations residing in the country, particularly that portion that is undocumented or irregular’ (Plenária 2021). There were five regional stages, one for each region of the country, between June and July, followed by the national stage, held in August.

The process of organising the event began in January 2021 in conversations held between the *Comissão de Saúde da Central Única dos Trabalhadores* [National Trade Union Centre Health Commission], the *Rede* and the *Centro de Direitos Humanos e Cidadania do Imigrante* (CDHIC) [Centre for Human Rights and Immigrant Citizenship]. A series of preparatory and mobilisation meetings then followed with organisations, activists and academics aiming to engage actors from all parts of the country. Although the actions developed in the Plenary sessions are of interest to the central argument of this work as a fundamental strategy for making the demands for ensuring access to the SUS for immigrant populations visible, I will not describe them in detail here. The focus is on two illustrative episodes of the clash between the paradigms of universality and equity that underlie the Brazilian public health system, one of which occurred in the preparatory meetings, and the other in the Final Plenary of the South regional stage.

The first episode took place at the launch meeting of the Plenary organisation, held on 5 March, 2021. More than 30 organisations participated, and the first speech was by an epidemiologist who represented one of the social movements that made up the Organisation Committee.

I would like to bring up here the sum of my initial impressions. It is always necessary to consider the relationship between the needs of the national population and migrant populations, as we need to maintain the perspective of non-discrimination on the horizon. The Plenary is welcome, so long as it does not result in the creation of separate care services, nor in the creation of ***care privileges for migrants***, especially because this could result in difficulties in the forming of alliances, of turning a public that could be our allies into a hostile public. How big does the SUS have to be to serve everyone? Indeed, many people talk about equity, but what is constitutionally stipulated is that the SUS is egalitarian, not equitable. (Field record, 5 March, 2021; emphasis added)

It is important to emphasise that there is a difference between proposing specific health promotion strategies or a health policy for immigrant populations, as is the case with the homeless population, and proposing the creation of a health subsystem, as is the case with Brazilian Indigenous peoples. This proposition has already been rejected in Brazil by immigrant movements (Yujra 2020), particularly because the horizon of this type of positive discrimination tended towards ghettoisation, with health units and teams separated from those used by the general population, in addition to huge susceptibility to low funding and budget cuts.

Furthermore, it is essential to consider that the perspective of the scarce right, which advocates that the more people have a certain right guaranteed, the less right there is to access, cannot apply to the right to health, since guaranteeing the expansion of access to the SUS for immigrants ensures, in turn, an expansion of access to the public health system by Brazilians. One example might be exemption from the requirement for proof of residence, which would benefit the thousands of immigrants living in irregular occupations and residents under informal rental contracts, but would also expand the right of access to vaccines against COVID-19 to thousands of Brazilians living under very similar conditions – the case of Samuel, a naturalised Brazilian, is emblematic. Another example might be that of the Warao Indigenous people, from Venezuela, who during the Plenary claimed to be served by the Indigenous Healthcare Subsystem. This subsystem is exclusive to non-village Brazilian Indigenous people, and needs to guarantee healthcare in an intercultural manner, respecting traditional Indigenous knowledge. Ensuring that the Warao people can be served by this health subsystem would guarantee that thousands of Indigenous Brazilians living in cities also have access to it – and that they are, therefore, recognised as Indigenous by the Brazilian state even though they live in urban centres.

It is also important to understand the distinction made by the doctor between what is called equal access and equitable access to the SUS. The guarantee of 'universal and equal access' to the SUS, present in Article 196 of the Federal Constitution, presupposes formal isonomy between its users. In other words, everyone must be treated identically by the law, 'leaving to the principle of equity that which, in legal theory, corresponds to the notion of equality in a material or substantial sense' (Sarlet & Figueiredo 2014, p. 140). Thus, it is possible to understand that these are not mutually exclusive principles, but rather complementary, since regional, social, racial and other inequalities justify the adoption of positive discrimination in order to mitigate them.

In other words, universality should not be understood as the imposition of *identical* rules for access to the SUS by users, since certain vulnerable social groups are in a condition of inequality with regard to the ability to comply with these rules. Applying the idea of formal isonomy as a synonym for universality means, in reality, *amputating the system's capacity to be universal*, since the guarantee of universal access necessarily involves privileging equitable access in a system that considers the inequalities that permeate the contexts that it forms a part of. There is no universality if we only apply the idea of formal isonomy, *since people have unequal capacities to comply with the access requirements*.

The other case occurred on 29 June, at the end of the Southern Regional Stage of the Plenary. All the activities were self-managed, and, at the end, the proponents of the activities were responsible for formulating three proposals to be discussed in the closing plenary. Two proposals raised a debate similar to that presented above: one, aimed at organising flows and protocols of service networks to and from migrants, inserting them into the existing networks of the SUS, the SUAS [Unified Social Care System] and other policies; and another proposed the production of a survey on the access of immigrants and refugees to social assistance and housing policies, specifying the nationality of the persons who access or try to access these policies, so as not to dilute them in the general data. An anthropologist, present at the event, took the floor after presenting the first proposal.

We have to think of health as a universal right, I will start from that principle. The problem is that healthcare for Brazilians is already difficult to access. I mean, we have a problem with access to healthcare in this country, right? So, we have to look for, and I'm trying to think together with you, mechanisms to facilitate access, **but not create privileges for the immigrant population**, if you know what I mean. (...) I mean mechanisms that facilitate access without it seeming that we are privileging [them] to the detriment of local populations who also have difficulty accessing and being welcomed by the health system. (Field record, 29 June, 2021; emphasis added)

The proposals were suspended, with participants initially agreeing to debate them again at the national stage of the event. However, after presenting the second proposal described above, the anthropologist restated his position.

I get very worried when we create mechanisms in relation to the migrant population, because it's a very sensitive topic, right? We see the example of other countries that seek to avoid forms of stigmatisation of the migrant population, or even studies that identify issues related to health and illness among certain nationalities. (...) How can we create these mechanisms for the inclusion of migrants in services, or their access to services, that could lead migrants to a condition of equal access in relation to local populations, rather than proposing specific care protocols, in which I think we run the risk of exoticising or stigmatising this population even more. (...) Yes, look, I say this here, I think everyone here has the best of intentions, and wants to think about alternatives and policies that are more effective in caring for immigrants. What I'm saying here doesn't go against this. There is a historical conditioning that precedes the discussion on health and migration, which is precisely the fact of identifying nationality as a study aim, or not, and determining cases or incidents of violence, or incidence of diseases related to people linked to the nationality of their country of origin. (...) We are suffering this now, right? Look at the pandemic, a Brazilian variant has been identified, we cannot, **Brazilian researchers** cannot enter France.

Look at that, right? We are living this, today. Right now, we are experiencing the identification of a possible Brazilian carrier of diseases so all Brazilians are prohibited from entering France due to the association of this variant with the body of Brazilians. (...) So, it worries me when, in a Plenary, we discuss issues of identifying nationality and associating the problem, whether it's disease... (Field record, 29 June, 2021; emphasis added)

It is important to emphasise the similarity with the position previously presented: the idea remains that addressing the inequalities in access for the migrant population would, in some way, create privileges for them in relation to Brazilians. The SUS, after all, is limited for everyone, Brazilians or immigrants, and facilitating access for the latter group – and, it must be said, this proposal is only being raised due to the identification of inequality of access in relation to national citizens, in particular to those who are wealthier and non-racialised –, would mean privileging them by not placing them on an equal footing with others. This formulation is only possible when it is considered that equal conditions exist prior to the debate on the guarantee of access that allows the establishment of what I previously called formal isonomy.

Furthermore, the anthropologist draws attention to the risks arising from identifying the nationalities of immigrants in health data, under penalty of intensifying stigmatisation, discrimination and racism. It must be said that this is a valid concern, and, indeed, the association between immigration and disease transmission is a phenomenon widely discussed in the literature on health and migration and, as the anthropologist highlighted, had even occurred during the pandemic. I will, however, divide the analysis into three parts in order to ensure a more comprehensive understanding.

First, it is crucial to scrutinise the idea that identifying the population served simultaneously attacks the principle of universality and institutes expressions of racism and discrimination. The argument that differentiation can violate the principle of universality is directly related to an assimilationist perspective that postulates that formal equality between persons in public matters necessarily derives from the flattening or suppression of the differences that constitute a given social group. Thus, the equality sought by the state could only come through the assimilation of difference and those who are different, guided by the construction of an archetype of citizen that should delimit said equality – speaking the language, having a certain skin colour or phenotype, sharing the same religious faith, having valid documents, and so on. In Brazil, this discourse is strongly informed by the idea of ‘one people, one language and one race for one nation’, which, among other issues, informs the rejection of the agendas of Black and Indigenous movements for identification and differentiation as a form of resisting colonial policies of extermination. Not by chance, the main exponent of Brazilian fascism today, Jair Bolsonaro, frequently uses this speech as a way of endorsing his fight against differentiations that, from this perspective, seek to divide the Brazilian people and territory, even serving to support the suspension of reparation policies for Indigenous and Black populations (Waltenberg 2020).

In health and healthcare contexts, the struggle of Brazilian Black movements for identification as a means of supporting, on the one hand, complaints concerning rights violations and violence committed in health and healthcare contexts, and, on the other, the construction of health promotion strategies specific to the reality of these populations, is well known. Thus, studies that indicate the use of less anaesthetic in the births of Black women (Leal et al. 2017), how Black women are less likely to undergo complete gynaecological and prenatal consultations (Miranda 2015), how Black men and women are touched less often in consultations and clinical examinations (Carneiro 2017), and, as previously mentioned, that Black people were over-represented in deaths from COVID-19, data that is available following intense mobilisation for the inclusion of the ‘race/ethnicity’ field in disease notification forms (Santos et al. 2020), are only possible by means of identification, which does not produce racism, rather it makes it visible.

The second part of the argument concerns the internal lack of differentiation of immigrant groups. It is not possible to identify inequities and respond to them by treating ‘immigrants’ as a monolithic, internally undifferentiated bloc. Proceeding in such a manner does not protect against discrimination, xenophobia and racism, on the contrary: such a stance is itself discriminatory, since it treats populations with languages, origins and cultures that are profoundly different from each other under the same heading. So, how is it possible to ‘identify the disadvantages’ relating to the migrant population’s access to the SUS without identifying them as non-nationals, and how do we develop strategies that guarantee that access will, in fact, be universal, treating different groups as if they were identical? Using practical examples, how is it possible to guarantee the presence of Lingala and Krèyol interpreters in healthcare services, or even the number of interpreters that should be made available in each territory without knowing how the territorialisation of the Angolan, Congolese and Haitian populations occurs? How can we produce informative materials concerning vaccination against COVID-19 in different languages without this data? Is it possible to hire immigrant *Agentes Comunitários de Saúde* (ACS) [Community Health Agents] without considering their countries of origin and the languages spoken? For example, would it not be a problematically racist stance when dealing with a Haitian community, if you hired a Cameroonian ACS and assumed they were all the same? What are the effects of this on the intensification of racism and xenophobia in health and healthcare contexts?

Finally, addressing the anthropologist’s discourse regarding the prohibition of circulation resulting from the health measures adopted due to the pandemic is essential. The ban on entry into France by any and all Brazilians due to the identification of a ‘Brazilian variant’ is, in fact, an expression of global, widespread, colonial racism and xenophobia, which found in the pandemic an opportunity to institutionalise the restriction on immigrant flows considered undesirable and the securitisation of borders. However, the shock is predicated on hidden suppositions: if before it was merely the indistinct mass of undocumented, irregular, illegal immigrants who were prohibited from circulating, now researchers cannot enter France. It is not just any Brazilian body whose forced immobility is of concern, but one whose class, race and gender are unaccustomed to being the targets of such measures. Failure to identify this Brazilian body could lead us to believe that they are all the same, and, as we know, they are not. For them to be so, it is essential to identify and recognise the differences, and then respond to the inequalities that are structured from these differentiation processes.

### **By way of conclusion: ‘Long live the SUS! Long live science!’**

During much of the vaccination campaign against COVID-19, the slogans that make up the title of this section were widely used by those who opposed what was conventionally called the denial of state agents regarding measures to contain the pandemic and mitigate its devastating effects, including the then President of the Republic. The celebration of the SUS, and, in its wake, the scientific research that enabled the development of therapeutic intervention instruments capable of combating the virus, however, ignored the consideration of those left behind in an eminently multiple pandemic traversed by differences and inequalities of several orders. Rather than representing relief, in reality, the vaccination campaign demonstrated that once people felt safe enough, the safety of others no longer mattered as much (Gonsalves 2022).

In this article, I sought to argue that undocumented status has a limited effect on difficulties in accessing the right to healthcare, highlighting that even immigrants who had documents – and who were, for all intents and purposes, legally Brazilian – were unable to get vaccinated. Thus, racialisation processes, understood here as the processes through which any social difference is essentialised, naturalised and/or biologised, anchoring them in fixed types of otherness, are more determinant than undocumented status in defining who is eligible for universal access in the Brazilian context.

Furthermore, the tensions between the principles of universality and equity frequently observed in the discourses of Brazilians in the face of demands for structuring certain health promotion actions specific to migrant populations demonstrate how the notion of equity is often considered to create privileges in a context of scarcity of rights, threatening universality. Here, universality is simultaneously considered to be the existence of a common substrate that confers the status of humanity to all, and equality of treatment before the law and public services and affairs. Thus, any action that proposes to create differences in treatment is perceived as an attack on the very notion of equality on which this particular concept of universality is supported, even if they are actions in which the objective is to map and mitigate inequalities that constitute the contexts within which the SUS is inserted. Based on this perspective, the paradigms of universality and equity are considered mutually exclusive, rather than complementary.

I also sought to demonstrate how the forgetfulness imposed by the state is articulated through an erasure often disguised as principles tributary to universalism that advocates that equality, called here formal isonomy, must be absolute and unequalisable, even in the face of inequalities that make this horizon virtually unattainable. Thus, it is precisely through the defence of an unequalisable universality that the impossibility of accessing certain rights as universal is constructed. The systematic refusal of state agents and experts to map or debate the health system's capacity to respond to the presence of heterogeneity, and the inequalities of access derived from this refusal, constitute what I call erasure mechanisms, aimed at imposing forgetfulness and the obstruction of certain memories, or even the allocation of uncomfortable political facts in the field of hallucinations (Branco-Pereira 2021; Gonzalez 1984).

The SUS is and must be heterogeneous in order to respond to the multiple contexts in which it is inserted. Universality is not possible without equity due to the inability of certain groups to respond to the rules imposed for access. In this sense, the struggles of immigrant communities and Brazilian activists register the demand for equitable policies of access and guarantees of rights, and justify the political demands of these communities, bringing them from the intangible to the concrete arena of public policy formulation. The imposition of forgetfulness on the sufferings that motivate these political demands thus loses its immediate effectiveness, even though they are completely asymmetrical forces involved in these disputes. Moreover, if the price of imposed silence is also paid by resignation and impotence, the reverberations of the refusal to impose forgetfulness compose the very substance of our possibilities of life and existence. Otherwise, memory impeded will merely be a hallucination in the face of the official version.

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# Le Poids de la tradition et la fragilité des valeurs modernes : analyse d'un roman de Germano Almeida

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## Résumé

Cet ouvrage prend un texte littéraire de l'écrivain cap-verdien Germano Almeida comme les anthropologues prennent les faits de la culture. J'examine la complexe intrigue développée dans le roman *Os Dois Irmãos*, centrée sur un cas de fratricide survenu sur l'île de Santiago, pour comprendre comment la tradition est localement vécue. En analysant les actions tragiques des personnages principaux de ce roman, je cherche à révéler certaines des tensions puissantes qui imprègnent les pratiques des paysans cap-verdiens ainsi que les valeurs primordiales qu'ils éprouvent comme une sorte de destin œdipien.

**Mots clés :** Cap Vert, fratricide, famille et parenté, tradition.

# The weight of tradition and the fragility of modern values: analysis of a novel by Germano Almeida

## Abstract

This work takes a literary text from Cape Verdean writer Germano Almeida as anthropologists analyze cultural facts. I examine the complex plot developed in the novel *Os Dois Irmãos*, centered around a case of fratricide occurred on the island of Santiago, seeking to understand how the idea of tradition is locally experienced. Analyzing the tragic actions of the main characters of this novel, I seek to unveil some of the powerful tensions that permeate the practices of the Cape Verdean peasants as well as the primordial values that they experience as a kind of Oedipal fate.

**Keywords:** Cape Verde, fratricide, family and kinship, tradition.

# O peso da tradição e a fragilidade dos valores modernos: análise de um romance de Germano Almeida

## Resumo

Esse trabalho toma um romance do escritor caboverdiano Germano Almeida como os antropólogos analisam os fatos culturais. Examino a trama do romance *Os Dois Irmãos*, centrada num caso de fratricídio ocorrido na ilha de Santiago, buscando compreender como a ideia de tradição é localmente vivida. Ao analisar as ações trágicas dos principais personagens do romance, eu procuro desvelar algumas das poderosas tensões que permeiam as práticas dos camponeses caboverdianos e os valores primordiais que eles vivenciam como uma espécie de destino edipiano.

**Palavras-chave:** tradição, destino, mundo camponês.

# Le Poids de la tradition et la fragilité des valeurs modernes : analyse d'un roman de Germano Almeida<sup>1</sup>

Wilson Trajano Filho

L'intention expresse de ce texte est de réaliser une analyse du roman *Os Dois Irmãos* (1998) de l'écrivain cap-verdien Germano Almeida. Derrière elle, cependant, se cache la tentation de faire une réflexion anthropologique sur la culture populaire cap-verdienne, en particulier sur le poids de la tradition dans la culture créole à partir d'un matériel littéraire. Je suis anthropologue de formation, et ceci est mon premier effort pour naviguer dans l'océan turbulent des analyses d'œuvres littéraires et, je dois le dire, je n'apprécie guère le tournant littéraire en anthropologie de la moitié des années 1980.<sup>2</sup> En conséquence, le lecteur trouvera certainement ici une série de méprises et de trivialités propres à l'aventure interdisciplinaire qui conduit l'anthropologue à se déguiser en critique littéraire. Outre les inexactitudes de fond de l'analyse, je suis particulièrement préoccupé par le manque d'équilibre entre le style rigide et esthétiquement sans intérêt des textes anthropologiques traditionnels,<sup>3</sup> dans lesquels abondent les notes de bas de page, les citations savantes et les tentatives obstinées mais généralement infructueuses de maintenir un dialogue symétrique avec la théorie anthropologique établie et avec ce qui est considéré comme l'état de l'art, surtout en ce qui concerne le domaine ethnographique, et l'écriture ou l'essai de la critique littéraire – un style qui se rapproche de celui de la littérature, qui est le sujet de son regard, dépeuplé des attributs qui, selon la perspective adoptée, identifient ou stigmatisent les textes scientifiques.

Tout d'abord, je dois souligner que ma compréhension de la culture populaire ne correspond pas au traitement standard que ce concept a parfois reçu en sciences sociales. Comme je l'ai déjà argumenté à une autre occasion (Trajano Filho, 2018), je ne la vois pas comme un ensemble de produits stockés sur une étagère ainsi nommée, quelle que soit la valeur attribuée à ces éléments de la production humaine – libertaire ou aliénante, démocratique ou élitiste, conservatrice ou rebelle. Je la vois comme une dimension de la culture dans laquelle la contradiction, l'incohérence et le paradoxe ne sont plus étonnants, ne méritent pas une attention particulière et ne sont donc pas évités ou traités avec un soin tout particulier parce qu'ils sont simplement des événements vulgaires et prosaïques de la vie sociale. Il peut donc s'agir d'un domaine qui déclenche ou repousse le changement, qui est marqué par la créativité et la nouveauté, ainsi que par l'imitation la plus grossière de modèles et de clichés qui sont déjà banals en soi. A cet égard, j'ai soutenu que c'est une dimension de la vie dans laquelle la culture accuse la culture de tricheries pour cacher ses éventuelles pertes d'authenticité (2018 : 337).

Celui-ci est encore un des concepts problématiques qui habitent la demeure des sciences sociales et des humanités. À l'instar de l'identité, la mimesis, la résistance, entre autres, l'authenticité a été un opérateur conceptuel essentiel dans les domaines de la philosophie, de la littérature, de l'art, des études culturelles,

1 Andrea Souza Lobo, Luís Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira, Denis-Constant Martin et Michel Cahen ont lu des versions antérieures du présent texte et ont contribué avec leurs critiques et suggestions. À eux tous mes remerciements.

2 Depuis le milieu des années 1980, l'anthropologie a connu tant de tournants que tout pratiquant qui a les pieds sur terre peut avoir vertiges et nausées. Ces tournants sont littéraires, linguistiques, réflexifs, existentiels, affectifs, ontologiques ... Il y en a eu plus d'un par génération, de sorte qu'il est improductif de les considérer comme l'expression de conflits intergénérationnels. Heureusement, le souvenir chaleureux et affectueux du bel album *Turn, Turn, Turn*, du groupe californien *The Byrds*, aide à faire face à la nausée.

3 Certes, il y a des exceptions. Pour me limiter à la tradition francophone, je souligne que certains de nos ancêtres ont accordé beaucoup d'attention à leur qualité d'écriture. *L'Afrique fantôme* (1988) de Michel Leiris et *Tristes tropiques* (1955) de Claude Lévi-Strauss en sont, probablement, les exemples les mieux connus. Mais voir aussi *L'Afrique ambiguë* (1957) de Georges Balandier.

religieuses, ethniques et du genre, ainsi que dans des travaux sur la culture populaire ayant pour thème la gastronomie, la mode, les sports, la musique populaire, le cinéma et les arts de la *performance*.<sup>4</sup> Comme ces concepts, elle aussi souffre du mal de l'obésité conceptuelle causée par l'inflation sémantique qui les amène à porter de nombreuses significations.

Les sujets qui l'utilisent le font comme si l'authenticité était une essence qui caractérise les choses et personnes du monde. Pour eux, elle est vécue comme le trait distinctif de ce qui est unique et original, le lien constitutif de l'identité de soi. En d'autres termes, ils la prennent très au sérieux. Elle est vécue et célébrée comme une configuration historique de présupposés qui semble hégémonique, par rapport à d'autres configurations, en revendiquant une autorité morale pour établir ce qui doit être reconnu comme constituant du rapport d'identité entre une partie et la totalité de la culture. C'est une configuration dynamique, en constante transformation, même si elle se présente généralement sous la forme d'un état permanent. Dans certains cas, elle peut avoir les contours d'une totalité unique, dans d'autres, insister sur son caractère non imitatif, à un troisième moment, prétendre être constituée de tensions et de contradictions, dans d'autres, être une force qui s'approprie et digère ce qui est en son extérieur, ou même prendre des dessins différents. Malgré ses expressions matérielles et sensibles, le noyau de l'authenticité est de nature morale. D'une manière que je ne peux pas explorer ici, je pense qu'en tant que configuration revendiquant une autorité morale et un trait sacré, l'authenticité est en quelque sorte équivalente aux configurations qui génèrent des revendications ou des demandes de présupposés moraux incarnés sous la forme d'honneur et/ou de dignité. Ainsi, l'authentique, l'honorable et le digne auraient une substance morale équivalente, qui se présente sous des formes historiquement différenciées.<sup>5</sup> Tous, cependant, s'expriment à travers le même langage : celui de la déférence. Cela vaut tant pour la déférence implicite dans les rituels d'interaction produisant le consensus du travail qui sous-tend tous les rapports sociaux (Goffman, 1967), que pour celle qui exprime la substance morale de l'honneur et de la dignité, qui exigent toujours une reconnaissance (Cardoso de Oliveira, 2004), ainsi que pour celle qui produit et évoque l'authenticité de la culture.

Toutefois, au-delà des célébrations de l'authenticité, généralement sous la forme d'une aura mystifiante qui lui attribue une nature morale et sacrée (comme dans le culte de l'authenticité), on constate qu'il s'agit, après tout, d'un jargon, un registre, une langue dans la langue qui, selon Adorno (1973 : 7), utilise la désorganisation comme principe organisateur. Grâce à cette aura sacrée, les termes qui le composent (authenticité, identité, mimesis, etc.) sonnent comme s'ils disaient quelque chose de plus élevé que ce qu'ils disent lorsqu'ils sont utilisés en dehors de ce jargon. C'est pourquoi ils peuvent être utilisés de manière transcendante par opposition aux significations primaires qu'ils ont dans d'autres registres. Nous sommes ici devant un langage qui crée un monde de sujets absolus qui ne se sentent pas contraints par les déterminations objectives des relations sociales. Un tel monde, cependant, n'abrite pas tous. Issu d'une mystique d'exclusivité guidée par la logique de la séparation et de la distinction, il n'accueille que les authentiques, c'est-à-dire les sujets qui le parcourent grâce à la connaissance qu'ils ont de ce jargon.

Un peu plus terre à terre, mais aussi marqués par une sorte de transcendance mystique, il y a des mouvements d'authenticité culturelle déclenchés par des processus politiques de construction nationale. Ces mouvements ont été très importants dans les pays d'Afrique de l'Ouest entre les années 1960 et 1970. Caractérisés par un fort rejet des éléments culturels considérés comme des influences étrangères, ils ont favorisé un retour au passé précolonial à la recherche des valeurs et des coutumes d'une Afrique « authentique ». Ils sont devenus

4 Il y a de nombreuses références à ce sujet. À titre d'exemples, voir Adorno (1973), Baker & Taylor (2007), Bendix (1997), Bielo (2011), Borschke (2017), Fillitz & Saris (2015), Fine (2004), Johnson (2003), Kemal & Gaskell (2000), Loosely (2003) et Ryang (2015).

5 Voir Martin (2000 : 174), qui montre comment l'activité culturelle est ourdie par des fils qui joignent la production matérielle à la production du plaisir de créer et dont jaillissent la fierté, l'estime de soi et la dignité. Il faut dire, cependant, que Martin n'utilise pas la notion d'authenticité. En réalité, il me semble très réticent à l'égard de cette idée.

une véritable doctrine dans des pays comme la Guinée et le Mali, mais ont également servi d'inspiration aux penseurs et aux dirigeants nationalistes des autres pays comme en témoigne le titre du livre de A. Cabral, *Return to the Source* (1973).<sup>6</sup>

Adorno appelle la marque déposée (*trademark*) les liens qui caractérisent la relation entre le jargon de l'authenticité et les sujets choisis qui le parlent. Cela me semble être une description très révélatrice, car elle nous renvoie immédiatement au monde de la production industrielle de masse et aux forces objectives des relations sociales. Ainsi, d'une manière apparemment paradoxale, le langage qui crée un monde de sujets absolus (authentiques), sans contraintes structurelles, est lui-même un produit des relations sociales constitutives d'un moment historique, une période qui a produit l'idéologie artistique de l'unique en tant que rare, vrai et réel. Selon cette idéologie, l'authentique serait alors la vraie chose (*the real thing*) que nous cherchons tous avidement jusqu'à ce que nous trouvions terrifiés son véritable visage : celui d'un liquide sombre, sucré, gazéifié artificiellement, produit pour nous donner du plaisir et des ulcères.

Au fond, la culture populaire est ce coin de la culture dans lequel la notion même d'authenticité n'est plus une expression authentique de l'authentique, mais presque un outil de *marketing* maintes fois utilisé dans divers conflits, presque toujours associé à la conquête de niches dans le marché des biens culturels. Dans cette dimension sociale prédomine la logique de l'improvisation fondée sur l'utilisation répétitive (mais parfois créative) de formules pratiques (clichés) et de schémas qui guident la manière dont les individus attribuent des significations au monde, à leurs actions et à celles des autres et font face aux difficultés et aux obstacles de la vie quotidienne.

Je suppose dans cet article qu'une telle manière de comprendre la culture populaire peut apporter de nouvelles couleurs à l'univers rural de la vie paysanne au Cap-Vert. C'est dans cette scène que se déroulent les actions du roman de Germano Almeida, exemple représentatif de cette dimension du populaire.<sup>7</sup>

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Le livre est inspiré d'un cas réel de fratricide survenu à l'intérieur de Santiago au cours des années 1970, dans lequel l'auteur avait agi en tant que membre du Bureau du Procureur général, dans la mise en examen de l'accusé. Le roman raconte une tragédie familiale survenue autour d'André, un jeune émigré cap-verdien au Portugal. Après avoir reçu une lettre de son père, qui dit avoir surpris João, son frère cadet, allongé dans la botte de foin avec Maria Joana, la femme qu'il avait laissée quand il avait décidé de partir, André retourne dans son village et, vingt-et-un jours et vingt-deux nuits plus tard, il tue son frère.

Le récit reconstruit les événements qui ont conduit au meurtre à partir du jugement d'André. Le texte qui cherche à dévoiler les différentes vérités du fratricide est centré sur les actions de la cour et de ses principaux agents. En tant que professionnel du droit connaissant les techniques de production de preuves et de témoignages, de négociation de la vérité des faits et les outils rhétoriques utilisés pour encadrer les événements dans un cadre juridique au sens du terme, l'auteur crée un texte polyphonique dans lequel chaque voix cherche à établir sa vérité sur les événements qui se sont produits au cours des trois semaines écoulées entre le retour d'André et l'issue tragique prévue avant son arrivée. Tous les personnages parlent à travers une troisième personne : ceux qui sont directement impliqués dans la production de la tragédie – André, son père, sa mère, João, Maria Joana, oncle Doménico et les villageois – ainsi que les personnages directement impliqués

6 Voir Counsel (2008, 2010) sur la recherche de l'authenticité en Afrique francophone.

7 Inutile de dire qu'avec cette remarque, je n'attribue ni ne retire de valeur esthétique au roman en l'associant à la littérature populaire, comme on pourrait s'y attendre lors d'une lecture plus conventionnelle de l'idée même de culture populaire. Malgré cela, je remarque que *Os Dois Irmãos* n'est certainement pas le roman le plus heureux de Germano Almeida.

dans l'interprétation des événements – le juge, le procureur et l'avocat. Et c'est ce narrateur impersonnel qui, pour ainsi dire, édite les perspectives ou les lectures des différents personnages en les transformant en une sorte de narrateurs subordonnés.

Comme il est courant dans le travail de fiction de Germano Almeida, le récit remet toujours en question ce qui est pris pour certain, en soulignant les incertitudes qui habitent les vérités les plus vraies et en suggérant l'impossibilité de connaître toute réalité qui se veut absolue et plate. Et avec les nombreuses versions concurrentes qui apparaissent dans ce tribunal improvisé d'une école de village à la recherche de ce sceau qui fait autorité et qui est la « vérité des faits » exprimée dans le procès, l'auteur dessine le paysage du monde paysan de Santiago, ses valeurs les plus enracinées et ses contradictions les plus perverses.

*Os Dois Irmãos* n'est pas le roman qui représente le mieux le style sarcastique de Germano Almeida, dans lequel abondent les parodies et les multiples perspectives. Et pourtant on aperçoit à un degré moins accentué le même effort de subversion des canons réalistes, le même dédain caustique pour les traits qui ont été soulignés pendant des décennies comme ceux qui traduisent plus adéquatement la « vérité » de la mentalité cap-verdienne : la force tellurique, le nativisme, les liens irrémédiables avec le pays insulaire et isolé. Tous encadrés par les deux cadres qui se sont consolidés comme les meilleurs qui identifient le pays : la sécheresse et l'émigration. Les réalités sociales décrites dans le livre sont moins des réalités que des interprétations fébriles de formes de vie sociale vraisemblables et contemporaines. En dépit de cela, le roman a du réalisme, dans la mesure où le procureur Germano Almeida, présent au procès, est confondu, après des années, avec l'auteur Germano Almeida, qui est le narrateur des événements présentés dans le livre. La tension latente dans le livre entre réalité et invention, entre meurtre et délire, me semble bien représenter l'ambivalence qui caractérise l'univers de la culture populaire tel que je le comprends. Et le centre de tout cela réside dans la tension entre le procureur, l'auteur et le narrateur de l'intrigue dans la figure de l'écrivain Germano Almeida, qui mélange intentionnellement et de manière créative l'histoire (*history* : la séquence des faits tels qu'ils ont été appréhendés au cours de l'instruction, qui est la dimension la plus institutionnalisée de ce qui s'est passé, encadrée et figée par un style d'écriture spécifique, le texte juridique), propre à la culture officielle, lexicographique et autoritaire de l'État (Herzfeld, 1986), avec une histoire (*story* : récits à plusieurs visages, variables selon les yeux de ceux qui les racontent, sans porter le tamis de la seule vérité), une forme narrative typique de la culture vivante et ambivalente de la vie quotidienne.<sup>8</sup>

Avant que les erreurs typiques de l'aventure transdisciplinaire qui amène ici l'anthropologue à assumer le rôle de critique littéraire ne s'accumulent, je tiens à préciser que je considère les événements relatés dans le roman comme une représentation de la vie sociale dans un village paysan, selon le point de vue natif – il est vrai qu'il s'agit d'un natif éclairé. Le matériel que je vais analyser ne fait pas référence à ce qui est réellement arrivé, au sens de réalisme naïf et terrestre, mais concerne ce qui aurait raisonnablement pu se passer. En d'autres termes, je prends ce texte de fiction comme les anthropologues prennent les faits de la culture.<sup>9</sup> Dans ce cas, il convient de mentionner que l'ethnographe n'est pas moi, mais un Cap-verdien beaucoup plus qualifié que l'anthropologue pour sa connaissance et sa familiarité avec le monde *badiu* de Santiago, sa sensibilité à percevoir les détails les plus subtils de l'âme paysanne, chose rare chez les étrangers, pour son insertion particulière dans l'univers de la culture populaire, qui l'immunise contre les peurs générées par les contradictions, incohérences et paradoxes qui y résident et, enfin, pour le talent qu'il possède de raconter des histoires que pas même les

8 Sur la relation tendue entre les récits écrits du monde officiel, tels qu'ils se retrouvent dans les textes juridiques et les documents officiels, et les formes orales de récits populaires, les rumeurs et les proverbes, voir Trajano Filho (1993).

9 Il n'y a rien de nouveau à ce sujet. Les exemples d'anthropologues utilisant les outils de la discipline pour examiner des textes littéraires ne manquent pas. Mary Douglas (1966) et son analyse des abominations du Lévitique peut déjà être considérée comme un classique. Da Matta (1979), et son essai sur *Augusto Matraga*, idem. Des exemples plus récents sont les textes de Muller (2008) sur Tristan et Iseut Isolde et El Far (2014) sur *A Moreninha*.

plus beaux princes de notre anthropologie ne rêvaient d'avoir.<sup>10</sup> Cependant, je n'analyserai pas la rhétorique de Germano Almeida, ses stratégies narratives et son pouvoir magique de créer des mondes dans lesquels nous pouvons tous vivre. Son écriture, ses figures de style, son usage artisanal du langage, bref, sa signature personnelle sera délibérément laissée sans examen. Cela n'est pas dû à mon malaise face au tournant littéraire en anthropologie, mais simplement au fait que, en tant qu'anthropologue, je ne dispose pas des outils analytiques nécessaires pour accomplir cette tâche. En tout cas, ce texte de Germano Almeida a fait l'objet de l'intérêt de plusieurs critiques littéraires comme Ferreira (2015), Pires (2015) et Costa (2017).

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Il faut maintenant expliquer un peu plus en détail l'intrigue enchevêtrée du roman pour la soumettre à l'analyse anthropologique.

André vivait au Portugal depuis trois ans lorsqu'il a reçu une lettre de son père l'informant très sèchement d'une tragédie vécue par sa famille. Il avait surpris João allongé sur Maria Joana dans la botte de foin près de la maison et avait demandé le retour immédiat de son fils. André avait épousé Maria Joana environ un an avant de partir au Portugal. Le mariage avait été traité entre les parents des jeunes, comme une forme de réparation de la « faute » que les jeunes gens avaient commise. Nous ne savons rien des motivations qui ont poussé André à émigrer. Il aimait les nouveautés et un jour, il a simplement fait part à son père de son désir de partir. Celui-ci, après réflexion, n'a pas mis d'obstacles, car il savait que le fils, malgré ses 19 ans, était déjà chef de famille et devait donc savoir ce qui était mieux pour lui et sa femme (p. 189).

Comme dans la vie sociale au Cap-Vert, le désir d'émigrer dans le roman est naturalisé et semble être le sort commun de presque tout le monde.<sup>11</sup> Nous ne connaissons pas les détails du processus de migration d'André, mais il convient de noter que, loin d'être un choix individuel, l'émigration au Cap-Vert est un processus qui implique les efforts de la famille élargie et d'une partie substantielle du réseau social de ceux qui émigrent pour amasser les ressources financières nécessaires pour acheter le billet international et obtenir le visa d'entrée, ainsi que l'organisation du déplacement (fournir des informations et des aides dans les lieux où passe le migrant). À l'exception des familles les plus aisées, il s'agit d'un processus complexe qui exigera de toutes les personnes concernées une grande capacité de se débrouiller et une bonne connaissance des pratiques d'improvisation pour faire face aux obstacles imprévus de toutes sortes afin de rendre possible le rêve de s'embarquer et de vivre au loin. Ces qualités sont généralement très appréciées localement, en particulier parmi les plus pauvres.

Au début, André avait du mal à s'adapter au nouveau pays. Le travail différent et intense, le froid, la nourriture et la distance des parents (surtout de la mère) et de sa femme lui ont fait subir les douleurs de la nostalgie. Cependant, avec le temps, la coexistence avec les nouveaux amis, l'adaptation à la vie urbaine portugaise troublée et, plus particulièrement, la relation avec une Cap-verdienne de Santo Antão ont balayé les souvenirs des premiers temps vers les coins cachés de la mémoire. Au bout d'un moment, André ne parlait presque plus de son village, de sa famille et de sa femme. Il ne pensait plus revenir et écrivait à cette dernière comme on écrit, par obligation, à un parent. En fait, il est allé jusqu'à déclarer au tribunal qu'il ne lui était jamais venu à l'idée de la faire venir au Portugal. Il se sentait éloigné d'elle et de sa vie dans son pays d'origine et ne pouvait pas l'imaginer face à l'hiver européen ou en train de travailler au Portugal (p. 227).

<sup>10</sup> Je ne crois plus qu'il soit nécessaire de dépenser de l'encre pour justifier une telle perspective. Depuis que Geertz (1983) nous a rappelé que nous sommes tous des indigènes maintenant et que Velho (1981) nous a exhortés de traiter sérieusement les interprétations des spécialistes du social qui ne sont pas liés aux sciences sociales (journalistes, poètes, romanciers, musiciens, cinéastes, etc.), il me semble qu'il n'est pas du tout controversé d'utiliser le matériel ethnographique d'autrui pour faire de nouvelles lectures sur le réel. Worsley (1956) et M. G. Smith (1956) ont remporté le prestigieux *Curly Bequest Prize Essay* ré-analysant le matériel Azande et Tallensi produit respectivement par Evans-Pritchard et Fortes. La différence est que dans ces cas, les sources originales étaient des personnes du panthéon anthropologique alors que dans mon cas, c'est un conteur professionnel.

<sup>11</sup> L'émigration réelle ou son désir imaginaire font partie d'une phase de la biographie culturelle des Cap-verdiens (Åkesson, 2004).



On sait peu de choses sur ce qu'André faisait au Portugal. Nous déduisons, à partir d'informations recueillies ici et là dans le roman, qu'il provenait d'une famille paysanne relativement aisée. Dans son pays d'origine, il a vécu chez ses parents, même après son mariage, comme il est d'usage dans le monde paysan de Santiago. Sa famille avait quelques têtes de bétail et sa chambre était meublée d'articles qui suggéraient une distinction sociale et économique, tels qu'une commode, une armoire, un grand miroir et une lourde chaise doublée de velours (p. 53). Ces deux derniers articles auraient été les premiers de son village, situé à environ quinze kilomètres d'une ville dont nous ignorons le nom. La nouveauté du miroir était telle que tous les villageois avaient rendu visite à André pour se voir intégralement de la tête aux pieds. En plus d'une relative aisance économique, nous savons également que son père était une personne très respectée et influente dans la communauté et disposait de ressources financières, notamment pour payer l'avocat qui prenait soin de sa défense.

La richesse relative des familles paysannes a une expression très appréciée dans l'exposition d'objets de consommation dans les coins publics des maisons, tels que les salons et les cuisines. En fait, ces dernières ne sont, pour la plupart, que des pièces décoratives, puisque presque toute la transformation des aliments se fait dans la cour intérieure ou dans la cour arrière des maisons, la cuisine elle-même étant réservée à des activités mineures et exceptionnelles telles que la préparation du café ou une soupe de nuit pour les invités considérés illustres. Dans les salons de ces maisons il y a une profusion d'objets décoratifs. Les fleurs en plastique et en tissu aux couleurs très vives contrastant avec l'environnement aride de l'île, où la palette de couleurs varie du gris au sable, font une forte impression sur le visiteur. Une variété de cadres photo contenant des photographies de mannequins professionnels, tirées de magazines américains et européens, plutôt que de membres de la famille comme on pourrait l'imaginer, sont également enregistrés dans la mémoire de l'ethnographe qui a vécu dans cet environnement.<sup>12</sup> L'exposition publique de l'abondance se complète par la présence de pièces génératrices de distinction sociale comme de grands miroirs, des fauteuils en velours et des réfrigérateurs qui embellissent des maisons construites dans des villages où il n'y a pas d'électricité. La plupart de ces biens sont généralement associés à la vie dans l'émigration : parfois ce sont des cadeaux offerts par des parents émigrés, parfois ce sont des acquisitions des membres de la famille eux-mêmes quand ils vivaient à l'étranger, parfois ce sont des produits achetés avec des revenus obtenus à l'étranger.

Nous savons que, au Portugal, André partageait une chambre louée avec quatre compatriotes (p. 16). L'un d'eux, Pedro Miguel, était né et avait grandi dans le même village qu'André. Il était aussi rentré à Santiago le jour fatidique où André tua son frère. À propos des deux autres colocataires, nous sommes informés seulement qu'ils étaient compatriotes. Nous savons aussi que pour aller au travail, André prenait quatre autobus, puis il marchait encore un bon bout de chemin (pp. 25-26). Au total, cela lui prenait environ deux heures de route. Son travail était lourd, ce à quoi il n'était pas habitué (p. 23). Tout cela renforce ma suggestion selon laquelle, bien qu'il vienne d'une famille de paysans aisés de Santiago, il a vécu à Lisbonne comme quelqu'un qui possédait peu de biens, parce que sa faible scolarité ne le qualifiait pas pour un travail bien rémunéré dans ce nouvel endroit. Probablement, comme tant d'autres compatriotes de pays et de continent, il vivait une vie serrée et peu confortable dans un quartier périphérique de Lisbonne. Ses trois années passées au Portugal ne lui ont probablement pas permis d'accumuler le capital social (compétences et connaissances liées au travail, à l'éducation formelle, à l'emploi qualifié), économique (épargne substantielle) et culturel (valeurs, idées, styles de vie) qui aurait profondément transformé sa vie. En fait, comme beaucoup de ses compatriotes, André travaillait sur le chantier, vêtu d'une salopette, « accroché à la voiture à mortier ou portant des briques » (p. 115).

<sup>12</sup> Crucifixes, médailles religieuses et drapeaux d'équipes sportives complètent l'arsenal décoratif des maisons des familles paysannes relativement aisées. Sur les drapeaux voir Trajano Filho (2012, 2015).

Ce fait est très pertinent pour l'argument qui va suivre. En tout état de cause, les cas de personnes relativement aisées dans leur pays d'origine, de familles influentes localement, respectées et reconnues pour leurs capacités et leurs talents, de personnes intellectuellement sophistiquées, d'artistes ayant un certain prestige local, avec un niveau d'éducation qui diffère du commun dans leur pays, mais qui vivent de façon précaire en émigration, sont très courants. À l'étranger, ils occupent des emplois non qualifiés dans le secteur de la construction et d'autres emplois mal rémunérés, peu prestigieux et avec un réseau de protection sociale réduit, comme les gardiens de nuit, les employés de nettoyage public, les serveurs dans les bars et les restaurants, etc.

Je dois insister sur le fait que je ne me réfère pas à une élite urbaine instruite, mais à des familles paysannes relativement aisées, comme celles que je décris dans Trajano Filho (2009, 2011 et 2014), dont les chefs ne descendent pas directement des anciens *morgados*. Dans le cas d'André, malgré l'aisance relative de son groupe de parenté, c'était une famille paysanne dont tous les membres étaient engagés dans la production de la vie matérielle à plein temps. Le dévouement de ses jeunes membres aux études n'était pas une priorité dans cet environnement social. Au moment des événements relatés dans le roman, il n'y avait pas d'établissements d'enseignement supérieur au Cap-Vert, ce qui m'amène à conclure qu'André n'aurait fait que des études secondaires, et même cela était peu probable.

Je remarque que les personnages du roman, à l'exception du juge, de l'avocat de la défense et du procureur, sont des paysans qui habitent le monde rural de Santiago. Cependant, les dimensions physiques de l'île font que même le village paysan le plus reculé n'est pas si déconnecté du monde urbain. L'isolement est donc relatif au Cap-Vert. Le village où résidait la famille d'André n'était qu'à quinze kilomètres d'une ville ; le procès s'est déroulé dans un tribunal improvisé à l'école d'un village voisin : les distances physiques et institutionnelles n'étaient pas abyssales. Ceci suggère un état de correspondance mutuelle entre les mondes rural et urbain. Le monde rural se projette dans le monde urbain et ce dernier pénètre le rural.<sup>13</sup> En réalité, la correspondance mutuelle entre l'ancien et le nouveau et la coexistence tendue entre des valeurs vécues comme primordiales et des valeurs considérées comme perturbant la tradition constituent le fond de la tragédie survenue. C'est un thème récurrent dans les études sur la culture populaire en Afrique. Les paroles des chansons et les textes des récits populaires traitant des relations entre hommes et femmes, en particulier de la perte et de la séparation, des promesses non tenues et des trahisons dans des contextes de changement social intense, sont très courants dans la musique, le théâtre et la littérature populaires sur le continent africain.<sup>14</sup> Dans le monde urbain africain, les chansons populaires qui évoquent les relations amoureuses soulignent à plusieurs reprises la souffrance et la douleur qui découlent de la rupture d'un vœu d'amour. Et dans de nombreux pays, la relation entre la douleur et l'alcool est un fait culturel (Akyeampong, 1996: 153). Le roman de Germano Almeida, curieusement, utilise les mêmes éléments – souffrance, douleur et alcool – mais les place dans le contexte d'un mariage sans liens romantiques profonds et d'une supposée infidélité conjugale. La conséquence n'est pas la souffrance amoureuse mais le fratricide. Je souligne, cependant, que ces thèmes constituent, plus que des sujets chers à la culture populaire, la dimension de la vie sociale dans laquelle nous observons le choc entre l'ancien et le nouveau. C'est dans ce domaine du social que l'on trouve le plus souvent la coexistence insouciante avec la contradiction. Au Cap-Vert, par exemple, il n'est pas rare d'observer des attitudes de respect inflexible du plus

13 Cela a été montré dans de nombreux travaux sur la culture populaire en Afrique. Voir, par exemple, Mallet (2009) sur le *tsapiky*, un genre musical qui a été développé dans le sud-ouest de l'île de Madagascar depuis les années 1970. Produit d'un tourbillon d'influences, ce genre est apparu dans un lieu qui a toujours été un centre d'échanges commerciaux historiques et qui représente bien la logique du métissage et de l'interpénétration entre le rural et l'urbain.

14 Voir Fabian (1978, 1990, 1998), Collins (1992), Martin (1995), Gondola (1997), Akyeampong (1996), Cole (1997), Barber, Collins and Ricard (1997), Larkin (1997), Plageman (2012) et Trajano Filho (2018). Outre le travail des historiens et des spécialistes des sciences sociales, il est intéressant de noter que les écrivains traitent également de manière réflexive de la tension créée par l'interaction mutuelle entre le nouveau et l'ancien, le monde des villages et des villes. Pour rester dans la littérature africaine en portugais, je renvoie le lecteur au roman de Paulina Chiziane (2002) intitulé *Niketche: uma história de Poligamia*.

jeune envers le plus âgé en même temps que l'on enregistre des attitudes et des paroles dans des situations publiques de moquerie qui bordent l'offense du premier envers le second. Ce qui est curieux, c'est que les deux formes sont attendues.

La fatidique lettre télégraphique du père a dit sans ambages « ton frère se met à sortir avec ta femme » (p. 19). André a soudainement décidé de revenir sur terre « mais c'était un André joyeux et ludique qui avait dit au revoir à ses amis » (p. 16), juste pour savoir ce qui se passait réellement dans la famille.<sup>15</sup> Il est revenu dans son village sans but défini et sans aucune volonté de vengeance. Le père le reçut avec bénédiction et très peu de mots ; la mère, à une certaine distance, sans oser s'approcher, avait l'esprit chargé par le sort annoncé et tragique qu'elle voyait venir irrémédiablement. Le frère, João, fut le seul à l'accueillir avec affection transparente et chaleureuse, avec poignées de main et conversation. Personne du village ne s'est approché de la maison pour voir le voisin qui était parti trois ans auparavant, même pas l'oncle Doménico, si proche et enjoué, n'est venu le saluer. C'est comme s'il n'était jamais revenu.

Au cours des jours suivants, André commença progressivement à prendre conscience de la tension dans la vie du village et du fait que, même de loin, il était au centre de ce tourbillon. Les premiers jours, il eut le sentiment qu'il n'appartenait plus à cet endroit et se sentit heureux d'être libre « de ce monde entouré de ces rochers agressifs et de ces valeurs immuables » (p. 114). Au fil des jours, a-t-il même déclaré dans le dossier, il a commencé à percevoir une hostilité à son encontre, « une sorte de critique distillée aux yeux de tous les voisins et de la famille ». Le regard de ses parents lui a fait se sentir « beaucoup moins qu'un chien errant » (p. 18). De son père, toujours sec et silencieux, il n'entendait que des imprécations envers João, et de sa mère, des excuses rares sur la distance et l'invisibilité avec lesquelles il était traité par les habitants du village. Le père pensait que João avait dépassé les limites de la décence et du respect en continuant de manger et de dormir sous le même toit que son frère, après l'avoir déshonoré. Il aurait dû fuir pour ne jamais revenir (p. 61). João défiait le père devant les yeux d'André. Un embarras mortel régnait au sein de la famille.

Au début, João et Maria Joana furent les seules personnes à qui André parla. Il demanda à João une réponse à propos de l'accusation de son père. Son frère a non seulement nié avec véhémence, mais il a aussi suggéré que son père devenait fou. De Maria Joana, André recevait chaque après-midi, dans une grotte voisine, son corps et des mots sur son innocence et la méchanceté de son beau-père. Tout cela lui faisait éprouver intensément le sentiment d'être un étranger dans son village, une énorme envie de partir et de reprendre sa nouvelle vie au Portugal.

Ainsi, André prit conscience du fait que son inaction était une honte pour le village et sa famille, du sentiment qu'il avait été banni et qu'il était une non-personne, un mort-vivant pour son père, son oncle et ses voisins. Le texte suggère à divers moments que la passivité d'André était équivalente à sa mort. Son père, dorénavant vêtu de noir, « gardait la maison comme si une personne était décédée dans la famille et qu'il y était disponible pour recevoir les condoléances » (p. 208). Jusqu'à ce que le fils aîné décide de venger son honneur, le père était « réellement sourd à tous les sons d'André et également aveugle à sa présence ... », « se comportant comme si son fils n'existait plus » (p. 208). Lorsqu'il s'est rendu compte que le fils était rentré du Portugal mais n'avait pas réagi comme il s'y attendait, il a fermé les fenêtres et les portes de la maison, la laissant dans la « demi-obscurité du deuil » (p. 124). Et quand, quelques jours plus tard, André tua son frère, son père ouvra les portes et les fenêtres de la maison comme s'il s'agissait d'un jour de fête (p. 152).

<sup>15</sup> Voici un autre indice de l'affluence d'André et de sa famille. Malgré le travail acharné de l'industrie de la construction, André ne manquait pas de ressources pour se procurer un billet d'avion, ce qui était très coûteux dans les années 1970. La décision de retourner au Cap-Vert pour découvrir ce qui arrivait à la famille et de reprendre ensuite la vie dans l'émigration suggère que André, contrairement aux émigrants les plus pauvres, qui sont illégaux et ne peuvent donc pas rendre visite à leurs parents dans leur pays d'origine, au risque de ne plus pouvoir rentrer à l'étranger, appartient à une famille avec des ressources.

Le sixième jour après son retour du Portugal, André eut pour la première fois en tête la vision de Maria Joana allongée dans la botte de foin sous João. Une telle vision lui vint quand, revenant d'une promenade à la campagne, il était passé devant l'étable où se trouvait sa vache, Bonita, et il avait commencé à la caresser. Sous l'impact de ce rêve fiévreux, André avait encore lutté contre une telle hallucination, mais il ne pouvait s'empêcher de voir la silhouette de sa femme dans la vache.

Se sentant traité comme un mort-vivant, André quitta le village pendant treize jours, au cours desquels il sombra dans l'ivresse des tavernes de Praia. Il ne revint que le vingt-et-unième jour, la nuit où il y avait un bal en l'honneur du retour de son colocataire d'émigration. Cette nuit-là, les sens enivrés, il se réveilla et alla au bal où il défia João qui était aussi présent.<sup>16</sup> João n'était pas du genre à se soumettre à ce genre de pression en public, mais, mystérieusement, il le suivit dans la ruelle où la guerre entre les deux frères eut lieu. Ce qui a suivi fut contesté devant le tribunal.

Dans la culture cap-verdienne, les bals et la consommation excessive d'alcool sont souvent associés aux bagarres, aux désaccords et à la violence physique. *Badju* (bal) est le mot créole le plus couramment utilisé pour désigner les occasions de convivialité où l'on danse, mange et boit en hommage à une personne (vivante ou morte), une institution ou une occasion. Il peut prendre la forme de fêtes familiales, organisées dans des résidences privées (bals familiaux), ou de « bals nationaux », également appelés « bals de souscription », organisés par un ou plusieurs individus qui vendent des billets permettant à leurs porteurs d'accéder à la salle et, éventuellement, à de la nourriture et des boissons en quantité. Ceux-ci peuvent être faits dans des résidences privées ou dans des lieux non résidentiels. Il y a aussi des occasions de danser qui font partie de festivités plus importantes comme les fêtes religieuses (y compris celles des *tabancas*), les festivals civiques et culturels comme les *batuques*.<sup>17</sup> Il n'a pas toujours été facile de distinguer une forme d'une autre. Pendant la période coloniale, beaucoup d'encre a été consacrée à l'élaboration de dispositions légales pour régler sa réalisation, distinguer les différents types de bals et régler les litiges entre leurs promoteurs et les agents de l'ordre, notamment en ce qui concerne la classification correcte du type de danse en question et le paiement des frais pour sa réalisation.

La législation coloniale est riche d'exemples de tentatives pour mettre un frein à ces festivités, à commencer par l'avis de l'administrateur de la municipalité de Praia, publié dans le Bulletin officiel n° 12 du 24 mars 1866, qui interdisait la tenue de *batuques* dans la ville pour être « un amusement qui s'oppose à la civilisation actuelle du siècle, car extrêmement gênant et inconfortable, contraire à la bonne morale et au calme public, » Le législateur a proposé de réprimer ces célébrations, surtout fréquentées par les esclaves, parce que, selon lui, le *batuque* « ne doit pas être vu par d'honnêtes gens de bonnes coutumes, qu'il appellerait au domaine de l'immoralité et de l'ivresse » (voir Trajano Filho 2006 : 19). Il existe de nombreux autres exemples de législation visant à interdire et réglementer les bals nationaux, les fêtes de *tabanca* et les *batuques*. Presque tous ces textes légaux mentionnent la nécessité de réprimer le désordre, les bagarres, la violence, l'immoralité, la perturbation du sommeil et la tranquillité des honnêtes gens, le bruit excessif, le manque de respect pour les valeurs chrétiennes, l'ivresse et la lascivité.<sup>18</sup>

16 Dans la culture lexicographique et autoritaire de l'État, où la vérité matérielle et ultime des faits est recherchée, l'avocat de la défense affirme que ce serait João qui aurait, de façon préméditée et délibérée, défié André de le poignarder dans le but de le tuer pour voler sa femme (p. 41-42). Son argument, cependant, ne l'a pas emporté, et la vérité officielle de l'affaire est qu'André a affronté son frère, a commis le crime d'homicide et a été déclaré coupable. Curieusement, la vérité matérielle s'aligne ici parfaitement avec la volonté publique. En revanche, la culture populaire, dans le cas du texte en cours d'analyse, voit tout cela avec beaucoup de sarcasme, comme on peut le voir dans les constructions plutôt caricaturales du juge, du procureur et de l'avocat de la défense.

17 Sur les festivités des *tabancas*, voir Trajano Filho (2006, 2009, 2011, 2012) et Semedo e Turano (1997). Sur les *batuques*, voir Nogueira (2012).

18 Dias (2004) écrit en détail sur les bals nationaux, en particulier à São Vicente. Trajano Filho (2006) présente et analyse les dispositifs légaux visant l'interdiction ou le contrôle des festivités des *tabancas*.

Outre les bals, la consommation d'alcool dans les zones urbaines est également associée à certains établissements commerciaux où sont vendues des boissons alcoolisées : les cafés, les bars et les tavernes. Les premiers, également connus sous le nom de *pastelarias*, sont clairement un héritage colonial. Ouverts pendant la journée (certains fonctionnent encore jusqu'aux premières heures de la soirée), les cafés sont des lieux de conversation et de sociabilité qui rassemblent des personnes (hommes et une minorité de femmes) autour d'un café, de sodas et de jus de fruits, de snacks et de bières. Les bars sont également des lieux de sociabilité, mais contrairement aux cafés, ils sont associés aux hommes et à la vie nocturne. La consommation de café et de jus de fruits y est possible mais peu probable. Les bières y sont consommées, mais la préférence va aux spiritueux (*gogo* et autres types d'eaux-de-vie, whiskies, etc.). Ces deux types d'endroits sont fréquentés par les classes moyennes urbaines. Les tavernas, quant à elles, sont de petites boutiques où l'on vend des objets liés à la vie domestique (bougies, allumettes, savon, maïs et haricots en vrac) et, surtout, du *gogo* produit localement. Les femmes et les enfants y passent très peu de temps : juste le temps d'acheter du maïs ou un paquet de bougies. Contrairement à eux, la présence d'hommes assis, courbés et fatigués sur de tabourets rustiques, en conversation bruyante ou en solitude silencieuse, est constante. Il y a toujours un verre ou une bouteille de *gogo* bon marché devant ou à côté d'eux pour leur tenir compagnie. Dans les tavernes, on ressent les douleurs les plus diverses du monde. Elles sont omniprésentes dans les villes du Cap-Vert, mais ne sont pas l'apanage du monde urbain. Elles font également partie du paysage des petits et grands villages de Santiago. C'est comme si elles étaient un médiateur entre le rural et l'urbain, entre le traditionnel et le moderne.

De nos jours, dans la zone rurale de Santiago, la forte consommation de *gogo* (eau-de-vie de canne à sucre) au son du *funaná* joué à la *gaita* et au *ferrinho* donne lieu à toute sorte de désaccords. Selon Dias (2004 : 193), l'imaginaire local associe ces événements (*badju di gaita*) à l'occurrence de bagarres où le couteau a une présence remarquable. Avec des coups de poing, des coups de couteau, des pierres et, parfois, des coups de feu, l'effervescence, la chaleur et l'ivresse des sens générés par la danse et la musique font émerger ces formes populaires de règlement de comptes qui sont, au fond, des expressions locales d'honneur et de virilité.

André prétendit s'être défendu contre les menaces de João. On sait qu'André poignarda João, puis qu'il rentra chez lui où son père le salua chaleureusement. João, se vidant de son sang dans la ruelle, devint fou. Il prit la direction de la maison paternelle et, arrivé là, en présence de tous les habitants du village qui s'étaient réveillés avec les cris, commença à insulter son père et les villageois, les accusant de sa mort non encore survenue, et menaçant tout le monde avec de violents jets de pierres. Plus tard, il alla, toujours en colère, à l'étable et commença à relâcher les animaux au milieu d'imprécations contre la famille et les voisins. C'est quand il faisait fuir les derniers animaux qu'André, sorti de la torpeur de sa renaissance, sortit avec le fusil et tira.

La confrontation tragique et tant attendue d'André avec son frère a lieu après qu'il se soit immergé dans deux espaces de la culture populaire associés à l'effervescence des sens et à l'ivresse des corps dans le continuum rural-urbain de l'île de Santiago, à l'alcool et à la douleur : les tavernes et le bal rural. C'est après les avoir traversés qu'André, imprégné de l'alcool fort du *gogo* pendant des jours dans une taverne, finit par céder aux exigences de la volonté générale (les valeurs de la tradition) et par revendiquer son honneur terni par la cupidité de son frère.

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Le conflit entre frères (et sœurs) est un sujet cher à la pensée humaine et se révèle dans quatre cas paradigmatiques de notre « tradition mythologique » : les cas de Caïn et Abel, d'Ésaü et Jacob, d'Étéocle et Polynice, fils d'Œdipe, et de la tragédie de Hamlet. Ce conflit est également thématiquement en dehors de notre mythologie fondamentale, trouvant sa place dans les littératures nationales non occidentales et les traditions orales des peuples les plus variés. Pour nous limiter à l'univers de la langue portugaise, outre le livre de

Germano Almeida, je pense au magnifique roman de Milton Hatoum, *Dois Irmãos* (2000), au classique de Machado de Assis, *Esau e Jacó* (1998), et, de façon moins directe, au beau texte de Mia Couto, *Jesusalém* (2009), et au déjà mentionné et stimulant roman de Paulina Chiziane, *Niketche: uma história de poligamia* (2002).

Dans la tradition littéraire occidentale, en particulier dans les textes susmentionnés, la relation entre les frères est assez différente, ce qui exige une certaine prudence pour ne pas faire une généralisation à la hâte. Dans certains cas, les frères sont jumeaux, comme dans les romans de Machado de Assis et de Milton Hatoum et dans le mythe biblique d'Ésaü et Jacob. Dans d'autres cas, ils ne le sont pas. À certaines occasions, la tension qui caractérise la relation est due à des causes extérieures à la relation entre frères, comme dans les cas bibliques de Caïn et Abel et d'Ésaü et Jacob, dont les rivalités sont dues aux préférences accordées à l'un par le père (à savoir Dieu, qui donne la préférence aux sacrifices d'Abel, le frère cadet) et par la mère Rebecca (qui a une nette préférence pour Jacob, également le dernier à naître). La préférence de la mère pour le fils cadet semble également être à la base de la rivalité entre Omar et Yaqub, les frères du texte de Milton Hatoum. Dans le cas du roman de Machado de Assis, la rivalité entre les frères n'a pas de cause précise, provenant de l'œuf, comme le suggère la discussion du narrateur sur le titre à donner au récit : roman *ab ovo*. Dans certains cas, la tension et le conflit aboutissent au fratricide, comme dans le texte en analyse et dans le mythe primordial de Caïn et Abel ou même dans le cas d'Étéocle et Polynice, qui s'entretuent. Dans d'autres, la tension trouve une certaine résolution grâce aux actions des personnages ou a simplement une continuité, sans résultat prévisible.

La tension caractéristique des relations entre frères (et sœurs) qui mène souvent à des conflits ouverts n'est pas exclusive à la tradition occidentale ni à ses formes narratives telles que le roman ou le drame. On la trouve dans la vie réelle de bien d'autres coins du monde. Elle est un sujet récurrent dans la littérature anthropologique classique qui a pour thème central les relations de parenté. Dans le monde africain, la littérature sur les jumeaux est vaste et indique généralement « l'embarras classificatoire » qu'ils représentent (Turner 1969 : 45) et les tensions et ambiguïtés associées aux principes de base de la structure sociale. En fait, la littérature anthropologique classique sur le sujet en Afrique aborde essentiellement la question de la relation entre jumeaux et structure sociale, en insistant sur la cosmologie et la religion, les rituels et les arts visuels.<sup>19</sup>

En dehors des cas de jumeaux, des études de parenté ont montré que la relation entre frères (et sœurs) est marquée par deux tendances diamétralement opposées. D'une part, la propension à la proximité, à l'identification et à l'unité. Créés dans la même famille, qui est l'unité de la coopération et de l'éducation, les frères (et sœurs) s'identifient en partageant les liens de dépendance et d'affection qui les lient à la source de protection, d'éducation et d'approvisionnement que sont leurs parents. Cela est d'autant plus fort lorsqu'il s'agit de frères et sœurs de même sexe ayant le même père et la même mère. Dans l'alimentation, les soins du corps, l'inculcation de valeurs, on voit le fonctionnement d'une sorte d'éducation sentimentale partagée au sein de l'unité domestique. La proximité et l'identification vont au-delà des domaines de la cognition et de l'affection pour atteindre pleinement le domaine sociologique. Les coutumes selon lesquelles une veuve épouse un frère du défunt mari ou un veuf épouse une sœur de la défunte épouse sont courantes dans de nombreuses sociétés (y compris la nôtre, il n'y a pas si longtemps). Ces pratiques appelées respectivement lévirat et sororat traduisent, dans les sociétés où se forment des groupes de descendance unilinéaires, le principe sociologique de l'unité du groupe de *siblings* (Radcliffe-Brown, 1950). Ce n'est pas une question de similitude de nature psychologique ou subjective, mais une identification structurelle faite par un sujet positionné à l'extérieur, qui prend les frères et sœurs comme membres du même groupe. Plusieurs autres aspects de la vie en société, parmi lesquels certaines propriétés de la terminologie de la parenté et certaines règles de conduite en ce qui concerne les conjoints des enfants du même père, expriment également l'unité structurelle entre frères (et sœurs).

<sup>19</sup> Outre l'analyse de Turner (1969), voir aussi celles de Schapera (1927), Evans-Pritchard (1956), Lienhardt (1961), Brain (1969), Southall (1972) et Peek (2011). Il convient également de mentionner les travaux sur les jumeaux dans le contexte des arts visuels, en particulier de la sculpture africaine. Voir Houlberg (1973), Imperato (1975) et Drewal & Drewal (1983).

D'autre part, il y a aussi une tendance à la rivalité. Là où il y a des frères, il y a une rivalité, un sentiment qui semble émerger de la compétition primordiale au sein de la famille. Ils se disputent l'affection et l'attention des parents, l'obtention de la nourriture, les priorités de toutes sortes au sein du groupe familial. Dans de nombreux endroits, les rivalités et les différences qui s'y rattachent prennent des formes linguistiques différentes qui sont cristallisées dans la terminologie de la parenté. Dans ces cas, l'ordre de naissance et l'ancienneté qui y sont associés s'expriment par une différenciation terminologique. Le frère aîné est souvent désigné par un terme différent de celui utilisé pour le plus jeune. Je soupçonne que le cadre cognitif et expérientiel lui-même, la matrice de toutes les formes ouvertes de conflit, que nous appelons une lutte ou un combat, est appréhendé dans les manifestations de la rivalité fraternelle.<sup>20</sup> En d'autres termes, nous savons ce qu'est un combat et nous apprenons à nous battre quand nous faisons semblant de nous battre avec nos frères. Au-delà de ce contexte psychologique, la rivalité fraternelle trouve aussi une expression sociale. Dans toutes les sociétés organisées en groupes de descendance unilinéaires, les lignes de clivage entre clans, lignages et segments de lignage traversent les frères et sœurs, en particulier les demi-frères et demi-sœurs. Dans ces cas, la structure de segmentation a une manifestation empirique dans les conflits, dans les séparations causées par des différends dans les processus de succession et d'héritage, et pendant les fissions des groupes de lignage liés de façon généalogique en tant que groupes de frères (et sœurs).

Les deux volets de la civilisation qui constituaient l'univers paysan de Santiago (les univers culturels de la côte africaine et du monde ibérique portugais) expriment la tension des relations entre frères et sœurs de différentes manières. Il convient de rappeler qu'en Afrique lignagère, les frères ne représentent pas seulement des points de segmentation potentiels des lignages. Ils sont également rivaux dans la compétition réelle pour le bétail utilisé comme monnaie dans les échanges matrimoniaux, pour l'accès à la terre à cultiver et pour les positions et les titres politiques et rituels. En général, le principe d'ancienneté, dont l'expression fondamentale réside dans l'opposition entre les générations adjacentes, oppose et subordonne les frères (et sœurs) plus jeunes aux aînés, qui se comportent à bien des égards comme des parents potentiels. L'unité tendue du groupe de *siblings* fait également que les frères dépendent fortement de leurs sœurs, car c'est traditionnellement par le mariage de ces dernières qu'ils obtiennent les ressources (souvent le bétail) utilisées dans les services qui font leurs propres mariages.<sup>21</sup> Dans l'univers paysan de Santiago, c'est la subordination-rivalité entre les plus petits et les plus grands. Et autour de cette subordination-rivalité entre les cadets et les aînés émergent de nombreux conflits entre frères et sœurs, en particulier ceux liés à l'héritage de la propriété foncière. De l'univers portugais, un mode de propriété foncière institutionnalisé est né du principe de la transmission non divisée des terres par primogéniture. Le soi-disant système du *morgadio*, qui a prévalu formellement au Cap-Vert jusqu'au milieu du XIXe siècle, prônait que la propriété serait héritée en indivision par le fils aîné. Ce système de transmission a « expulsé » les frères et sœurs plus jeunes des terres familiales, les poussant dans le commerce ou d'autres activités et à l'émigration et provoquant diverses tensions au sein du cercle familial.

Le conflit fictif entre André et João n'est ni fortuit ni épisodique. Au contraire, il est grammatical et exprime des tensions et des valeurs de la culture ainsi que des attributs de la structure de la société cap-verdienne. Je remarque qu'il se manifeste non seulement sur le plan le plus évident de la supposée trahison de João, qui a conduit au fratricide, mais se manifeste également dans l'opposition entre les deux frères en ce qui concerne leurs traits constitutifs. Ainsi, André s'oppose à João en ce qui concerne son caractère: André est loquace,

<sup>20</sup> Dans une monographie classique décrivant le système de parenté et la structure foncière d'un village ceylanais où la terre est rare, Leach (1961 : 107) a montré que les frères coopéraient rarement les uns avec les autres en raison de rivalités concernant la propriété parentale. Là, le principe de l'unité du groupe de *siblings* n'aurait qu'une expression formelle et rituelle et il ne serait pas un fait de la vie quotidienne. Voir aussi Gluckman (1963 : 185-186) pour la rivalité entre frères (et sœurs) parmi les Zoulous.

<sup>21</sup> Le cas Ndembu, analysé par Turner (1957), illustre très bien l'importance des liens qui unissent frères et sœurs dans une société divisée entre le principe matrilineaire de la filiation et la règle virilocale de la résidence post-maritale.

enjoué et plein d'humour (p. 33), mais il craint énormément son père (p. 43). Son antithèse, João, est provocant, rebelle, querelleur et courageux. Il n'a peur de rien et n'a jamais refusé un combat. Dès son plus jeune âge, son père ne le punissait plus physiquement, car il était parvenu à la conclusion qu'il était « ingouvernable » (p. 43).

Marquer l'opposition sociale entre frères par des paires d'opposition physique, psychologique, comportementale et professionnelle semble être une stratégie largement répandue dans la composition de textes. Caïn, l'aîné, était un fermier, tandis qu'Abel, le cadet, était un berger. Ésaü, qui est né le premier, était un chasseur, sanguin, avait la peau velue, et son mariage, au dégoût de ses parents, représentait une exogamie extrême. Jacob, le dernier à naître, était un berger, doux, sans poils, et épousa la fille du frère de sa mère, selon la volonté des parents, conformément à la coutume. Curieusement, c'est le gentil et docile Jacob qui, à l'aide d'une stratégie, a trompé son père avec l'appui de sa mère, modifiant ainsi le droit d'aînesse. Dans Machado de Assis, les deux frères (Pedro et Paulo) sont rivaux en tout et cela se voit clairement dans leurs personnalités, leurs occupations et leurs idéologies politiques. Paulo, avocat, est impulsif, ravissant et républicain ; Pedro, médecin, est déguisé, conservateur et monarchiste. Chez Milton Hatoum, Omar (le plus jeune) rivalise non seulement avec son frère, mais entretient également, comme dans le cas de João, une relation tendue et difficile avec son père. Leurs personnalités sont antithétiques, le plus jeune étant agité, indiscipliné, bohème et ivre, et le plus âgé (Yaqub), discipliné, rationnel, organisé et, ayant un talent particulier pour les mathématiques, devient ingénieur. Dans *Jesusalém*, de Mia Couto, les deux demi-frères sont également antithétiques, bien que la relation qui les unit soit moins de rivalité, mais de profonde affection, de tendresse et de soin. L'aîné est rebelle, extraverti, déterminé, pratique et lance un défi ouvert à son père (qui découvre plus tard qu'il n'est pas son père) ; le plus jeune est introspectif, rêveur, poétique et se révèle gardien du père sénile.

Dans la génération immédiatement ascendante, le père d'André semble être l'opposé de son frère cadet, Doménico. C'est le plus âgé maintenant qui est défini comme étant aride, en parole et en écriture, taciturne (p. 33), d'une franchise extrême, doctrinal et distant. Il prétend avoir toujours été un homme authentiquement religieux, précisant qu'il était « catholique, apostolique et romain » (p. 185), en ce sens qu'il ne partageait pas les (non)croyances des nouvelles religions chrétiennes néopentecôtistes qui commençaient à être présentes au Cap-Vert. La liste des livres qu'il aurait lus tout au long de sa vie ne fait qu'attester de sa religiosité normative et doctrinale : les hymnes et les prières de la *Cartilha*, le *Compêndio da Doutrina Cristã*, la *Bíblia Sagrada*, *A Chave do Céu* et *A Prática da Oração Mental* (pp. 187-188). À une autre occasion, la figure du père est dite revêtue d'un silence d'église (p. 33), car il ne sourit jamais (p. 34). À son tour, son frère cadet, Doménico, est sentimental, expressif, « un homme facile à vivre avec un sourire ouvert » (p. 34), « un grand conteur d'histoires » (p. 124).

Dans l'intrigue racontée par Germano Almeida, il y a une autre inversion qui souligne le champ d'opposition entre les frères. En raison de l'opposition entre les frères de la génération aînée, la relation entre les neveux et les oncles devrait être marquée par une extrême intimité, informalité et proximité, ce qui la différencie de la relation avec le père, marquée par le respect extrême, la déférence et la distance physique et sociale. C'est le cadre que l'on retrouve traditionnellement dans les sociétés lignagères de l'Afrique continentale et dans l'univers paysan patriarcal existant à Santiago. Cette différence est encore plus prononcée dans les sociétés qui mettent l'accent sur la filiation paternelle et où l'oncle en question est du côté maternel. Et en fait, bien que ce ne soit pas une société de lignage, on observe au Cap-Vert la coutume de traiter les oncles (dans ce cas, des deux lignées) avec plaisanterie.<sup>22</sup> C'est ce qui s'est passé entre André et Doménico avant que le neveu n'émigre au Portugal. Mais la passivité de sa conduite dans les premiers jours de son retour était si offensante pour les mœurs locales qui exigeaient une revanche immédiate, que même l'oncle Doménico n'accepta pas qu'André le traite avec proximité, liberté et affection, et devint ensuite une sorte de père, un parent qui devrait être traité avec une distance et une formalité frisant l'évitement.

<sup>22</sup> La littérature anthropologique sur les relations de plaisanterie est volumineuse. Je ne souligne que le classique article de Radcliffe-Brown (1940), qui sert encore aujourd'hui de référence à la discussion.



L'étrangeté d'André après trois ans passés au Portugal et son manque apparent d'adhésion aux valeurs traditionnelles agissent comme des éléments perturbant temporairement le système. Mais la source de la perturbation la plus intense réside dans les attitudes de João, qui enfreint les règles de la culture sans jamais avoir émigré. Le narrateur dit de lui :

André et João avaient été élevés dans le principe général selon lequel un membre plus jeune de la famille ne devrait en aucun cas être autorisé à oser réfuter un plus âgé, mais particulièrement dans le devoir spécial qu'un fils devrait toujours rester respectueux et obéissant envers le parent, n'osant jamais élever la voix devant lui ni se trouver dans le droit de contredire ses ordres. Or, dans tout le village, João était le seul fils à avoir ouvertement remis en question ces principes sacrés (pp. 43-44).

Si le conflit qui se présente à la surface de l'histoire est ce qui se déroule entre les deux frères et s'accroît jusqu'au fratricide, la tension sous-jacente réside dans la relation entre João et son père. Il est le seul dans tout le village à rompre avec le principe sacré de l'autorité de fer du géniteur et des anciens en général. C'est João qui en tout défie le père et les traditions ancrées de la vie villageoise. Il l'a toujours regardé avec une attitude provocante et avait grand plaisir à se disputer avec lui uniquement pour s'y opposer (p. 43). João disait clairement que son père était en train de perdre la raison en « voyant les démons de ses livres parmi les gens de la famille » (p. 43). Il a été le seul à avoir ouvertement réprimandé le mariage forcé d'André, lui conseillant même de ne pas se marier (p. 56). João a ouvertement manqué de respect envers son père, l'appelant publiquement « meurtrier de pute » et lui imputant la responsabilité de sa mort. Il compléta la bévue en disant : « c'est toi qui m'as tué, tu es un chien du diable qui doit encore mourir lépreux, mais je te verrai pourrir et te tourmenter dans la vie » (p. 164). Et ce n'est pas seulement en relation avec son père que João a renversé les principes de la culture paysanne de Santiago. Sa relation avec l'oncle Doménico n'était pas non plus attendue culturellement. L'oncle ne permettait aucune plaisanterie ou proximité de sa part, contrairement à ce qu'il faisait avec André. En outre, la tension entre le plus jeune fils et le père transparaît dans l'interprétation des agents publics chargés du procès. Il semble qu'ils aient vaguement partagé l'idée selon laquelle, dans tout le processus, il n'y aurait pas eu une seule mais deux victimes : João et André. Le père, et avec lui la voix publique du village, aurait incité le fratricide (p. 35).

Enfin, le prétexte même de toute la tragédie, la prétendue relation de João avec Maria Joana, a également ses contours d'inversion. Seulement, cette fois c'est sur le plan des relations entre les sexes. Dans tout le récit de Germano Almeida, il est suggéré que le contact avec Maria Joana déshumanise et bestialise les hommes. Le père dit qu'il a surpris les deux dans la botte de foin, l'espace du foyer plus proche de l'espace animal que de l'homme. Le père de Maria Joana, lorsqu'il vient négocier avec le père d'André en vue de leur mariage, déclare que la fille faisait le travail des hommes, lorsqu'elle apportait de la paille pour les animaux et les nourrissait (p. 54). Après son retour, les rencontres d'André avec sa femme ont eu lieu dans une grotte, un espace brut de la nature, non apprivoisé par la culture des hommes. La conscience ou la méfiance de la trahison lui parvient lorsque, sur une suggestion de bestialité, il caresse sa vache, Bonita. C'est en voyant sa femme dans sa vache et en faisant peut-être à sa vache ce qu'il était censé faire à sa femme qu'André commence à prendre conscience de son rejet, de sa honte et de son déshonneur. Enfin, dans la scène de la ruelle, peu avant d'être poignardé par André, João déclare qu'il « avait déjà monté sa femme et était sur le point de tuer André, afin qu'il puisse continuer à la monter » (p. 83),<sup>23</sup> dans une claire animalisation de relation avec les femmes.

Il est très intéressant de noter que la conduite des deux femmes dans le roman est une inversion de leur comportement dans la vie réelle au Cap-Vert. Elles sont passives, sans le don de la parole et de toute autre décision. Toute tragédie est le sujet exclusif des hommes et il appartient aux femmes de prier (dans le cas de

23 « Monter une femme » ici est une expression péjorative pour désigner un rapport sexuel entre humains. Ainsi, on couche avec une femme comme on monte à cheval.

la mère d'André) ou d'être montées ou possédées par des hommes (dans le cas de Maria Joana). C'est comme si le roman matérialisait dans le plan narratif l'idéal jamais atteint de cette société patriarcale, où les femmes des hommes embarqués sont comme les femmes d'Athènes, veuves de maris vivants dans l'attente éternelle d'un retour qui ne viendra pas, souffrant quotidiennement de rumeurs malveillantes sur leurs péchés. Et ce n'est pas seulement une figure de style qui révèle la réalité dramatique construite par les rumeurs. Parmi ceux qui restent, la perception que les émigrants sont comme des morts est ancienne et, dans une certaine mesure, répandue. À la fin du XIXe siècle, il était courant chez les paysans cap-verdiens que toute personne qui se rendait en Guinée fût rayée du répertoire des êtres vivants, car sa mort était une certitude. Dès le départ de l'infortuné, ses proches commençaient à porter le deuil, faisant même célébrer une messe du défunt et à chanter des litanies chez lui (Trajano Filho, 2014 : 49).<sup>24</sup>

Si nous étions dans un village isolé d'Afrique continentale, il ne serait pas du tout scandaleux pour André d'être remplacé par son frère comme mari de Maria Joana, compte tenu de son statut d'absent-mort. Et une fois confirmé qu'André n'était pas décédé et que celui-ci avait eu connaissance du mariage sous le lévirat de son frère, il aurait beaucoup de choix, sans avoir nécessairement besoin de la mort de son frère. S'il avait émigré en Europe ou en Amérique et y avait passé de nombreuses années, deux morales différentes agiraient pour éviter la tragédie : une morale primordiale et essentialisée, typique du monde des *corporate groups* de villages, dans laquelle le lévirat joue le rôle de force positive pour maintenir le pouvoir de reproduction du *descent group* ; et une moralité individualiste et égalitaire qui met tout l'accent sur la liberté de choix des personnes. Voilà une situation paradoxale, bien au goût de la dimension que j'appelle culture populaire. Mais le village cap-verdien dont André était parti n'était pas l'Afrique continentale imaginée par les anthropologues ; il n'y avait plus de groupes fondés sur l'unifiliation qui étaient *corporate*, il y régnait un sentiment d'honneur (individuel et familial) qui exigeait qu'André affronte « avec la dignité de l'homme le résultat irréfutable que tout le monde savait inévitable » (p. 13). C'est un village qui a développé un sentiment de grande honte comme on peut déduire par les mots du narrateur : « dans une promiscuité dégradante, André continuait à vivre tranquillement avec son propre déshonneur et celui de sa famille » (p. 13). La défense du prévenu est même allée jusqu'à affirmer, au cours du procès, qu'André aurait été « un instrument d'exécution d'un mandat populaire irrévocable » et que le non-respect de ce mandat serait une atteinte aux valeurs qui sont au-dessus et au-delà de sa conscience, telle que la sentence serait le mépris éternel de la communauté (p. 13).<sup>25</sup>

Les rumeurs, en fait, empoisonnent les relations entre voisins et, d'une certaine manière, exercent un certain contrôle sur la conduite des femmes. Selon le modèle implicite de ces récits populaires, les hommes se voient idéalisés comme des chefs de famille dotés du pouvoir de vie et de mort sur les femmes et les enfants. Pour reprendre les mots de l'oncle Doménico, « c'était trop de langue pour rester comme ça » (p. 19). Cependant, la dure réalité de la vie paysanne est que les familles sont principalement matricentrées.

La littérature sur la famille cap-verdienne est volumineuse et marquée de polémiques, mais en général les familles paysannes de Santiago sont sous-représentées dans ces études.<sup>26</sup> La famille représentée dans le roman

24 La preuve textuelle indirecte et complémentaire de cette croyance se trouve dans un passage dans lequel le narrateur note que, tout au long du procès, le père appelle João « la victime », comme si son nom avait été « complètement effacé de sa mémoire » (p. 61), et dans le passage déjà mentionné où il est affirmé que le père s'est habillé en noir, gardant la maison « comme celle de quelqu'un dont une personne de la famille est décédée et qui est censé recevoir les condoléances » (p. 208).

25 Comparer les événements de l'histoire racontée par Germano Almeida avec ceux du récit de Paulina Chiziane (2002) apporterait certainement des fruits analytiques intéressants. Dans le roman mozambicain, le mari de la protagoniste est déclaré mort (par erreur) et la famille du mari supposé décédé revendique ses droits à la veuve en la livrant au frère du défunt dont elle tombe enceinte. Du point de vue de la tradition, du groupe familial et même de la veuve, le lévirat est vécu comme prévu et avec force d'intégration. Du point de vue du mort supposé et, d'une certaine manière, de la veuve, le lévirat est vu comme une tension, un motif de conflit entre deux frères, sous la forme de jalousie qui monopolise des affections et qui est caractéristique de l'honneur dans les systèmes patriarcaux où règne une certaine forme d'individualisme, et, du point de vue de la veuve, une contrainte sur son autonomie individuelle, son pouvoir de choisir dans la dimension de l'affection.

26 Voir Åkesson (2004), Dias (2000), Silva & Fortes (2011), Lobo (2012, 2016), Correia e Silva (2014) et Fortes (2015), Laurent (2016).

est proche du modèle d'une famille nucléaire monogame d'inspiration chrétienne et européenne. Rien dans le roman ne suggère que le père d'André et João ait eu plus d'enfants avec d'autres femmes et encore moins que leur mère ait eu d'autres enfants avec d'autres *pais de fidju* que son mari, ce qui est très courant chez les paysans, qu'ils soient riches ou non.<sup>27</sup> En fait, le modèle de famille et de conjugalité proposé dans le texte de Germano Almeida est très rare dans la société cap-verdienne, étant limité aux couches urbaines très européanisées des strates moyennes supérieures. Dans le monde rural, les hommes issus des familles de grands propriétaires fonciers n'aiment certainement pas les unions monogames. Bien qu'ils aient souvent une épouse principale avec laquelle ils contractent un mariage religieux, ils entretiennent plusieurs relations plus ou moins durables dont naissent des dizaines d'enfants. Les enfants nés hors mariage bénéficient rarement d'une reconnaissance légale, mais une partie d'entre eux sont socialement reconnus selon des pratiques culturelles telles que le parrainage ou toute autre forme d'incorporation dans la maison et l'entreprise du *morgado*. De telles pratiques produisent un large éventail de clients et d'adhérents qui s'ajoutent au patrimoine des grands propriétaires, augmentant ainsi leur prestige et leur pouvoir. Les paysans aisés, comme le père d'André, ont des enfants avec plusieurs femmes des couches inférieures, et peuvent ou non être liés à l'une d'elles de manière plus stable et durable, mais ils contribuent de manière très précaire à l'approvisionnement économique et social de leur progéniture. Les autres hommes sont en relation avec les mêmes femmes et ont des liens encore plus faibles avec leurs enfants et leurs compagnes. Ainsi, les enfants nés de ces relations grandissent dans des familles qui s'organisent autour de la mère (et de la grand-mère), la présence physique ou affective des figures paternelles étant pratiquement inexistante.

Le modèle de famille le plus répandu en milieu rural attribue l'autorité familiale à la figure du mari-père, mais à un coût social élevé, car l'autorité patriarcale générée par ce modèle n'est rien de plus qu'une chimère. Elle ne se laisse pas montrer en action et se consolide rarement dans des familles concrètes, car ces dernières ne peuvent pas compter sur ses membres masculins adultes. Au lieu du père ou du mari absent, le soutien familial est centré sur le lien mère-enfant, avec la particularité que la maternité sociale dans ces contextes de grande précarité économique nécessite presque toujours la conjonction de deux générations de femmes (mère et grand-mère). Cela tient en partie aux faits suivants : traditionnellement, c'étaient les hommes qui émigraient (une image qui a considérablement changé au cours des vingt dernières années), les unions conjugales avaient une nature procédurale et les hommes y étaient incorporés en tant que maris seulement dans la phase finale du cycle de développement du groupe familial (quand ils le faisaient), les pratiques polygyniques étaient courantes dans une société organisée territorialement dans des paroisses très dispersées. Cela faisait circuler les hommes dans les ménages, plaidant pour une autorité qu'ils n'exerçaient pas au quotidien, tandis que les femmes, dotées d'une grande autonomie économique, menaient la vie de famille et exerçaient un commandement qui, selon un idéal patriarcal jamais atteint, aurait dû être en d'autres mains.

Il est difficile de comprendre pourquoi un observateur si attentif de la vie sociale, comme le sont les auteurs de fiction en général, a décidé de dessiner la famille centrale de la tragédie de manière à ressembler au modèle eurocentrique et non aux couleurs arides du paysage paysan. C'est peut-être parce que la famille nucléaire monogame est le seul modèle disponible localement et que toutes les pratiques familiales en sont perçues comme une perturbation ou un éloignement. Une autre raison plausible et pas tout à fait inattendue serait la projection dans le monde paysan du modèle familial des groupes urbains éduqués et européanisés, dont fait partie le multiple Germano Almeida (auteur, narrateur, promoteur). Toujours dans les limites d'explications raisonnables, il se pourrait que la famille d'André soit en fait une exception dans ce milieu. Peut-être qu'un père-mari extrêmement chrétien, comme on l'a déjà observé, pourrait amener son groupe familial à différer

27 C'est le nom donné aux hommes avec qui les femmes ont des enfants sans se marier ni avoir de relations stables et durables avec eux.

de la plupart des familles, mais il y a de nombreux signes intratextuels qui nous informent que dans tout le reste le patriarcat se conformait aux usages et coutumes de son village.<sup>28</sup>

Dans tous les cas, c'est dans cette société d'idéologie patriarcale et de structure matrifocale que le refus initial d'André d'assumer le rôle idéal d'homme qui porte l'honneur de la famille et qui a le pouvoir de contrôler la vertu des femmes (épouses et sœurs) a entraîné son bannissement et son traitement comme un chien par la communauté et sa famille. L'exercice fondamental de la nature humaine, qui est le don de la parole, lui a été refusé pendant vingt-et-un jours. Seuls João et Maria Joana, les perturbateurs de l'ordre social, ont échangé des mots avec le mort-vivant revenu de l'émigration. Et la sanction collective a été si intense que même les nouvelles valeurs incorporées dans les trois années d'expérience de la vie urbaine au Portugal n'ont pas été assez fortes pour éviter cette chronique de la mort annoncée. Même son éducation relative et son exposition à la modernité ne lui ont pas donné les moyens de résister au bannissement non déclaré (pp. 127-128). Cette sanction collective est si forte que même João, celui qui enfreignait toujours les règles locales, s'est subordonné à elle et s'est laissé conduire comme un mouton dans la ruelle où allait commencer son exécution. Et en se permettant d'être immolé par l'esprit collectif de vengeance d'honneur, João a engendré un André respecté et respectueux, un véritable enfant de la communauté.

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Cela nous amène à réfléchir au pouvoir de transformation de l'expérience migratoire dans l'univers social de ceux qui restent. L'agentivité et le potentiel de transformation des migrants ont été un sujet précieux pour les sciences sociales. En général, ils sont perçus comme des facteurs de changement et une cause de rupture dans la vie de ceux qui restent au pays. Ce n'est pas le lieu de discuter cette littérature, mais je dois rappeler que, dans la version traditionnelle des études sur les migrations internationales, le migrant est presque toujours un être liminal qui a rompu les liens avec sa communauté d'origine sans pour autant acquérir les compétences nécessaires pour opérer pleinement dans le nouveau lieu dans lequel il vit. Dans la version contemporaine des études transnationales, il est souvent représenté comme un voyageur hybride qui, divisé entre plusieurs appartenances à plus d'un territoire, subvertit les dogmes de l'État-nation et les valeurs primordiales des communautés locales.

Cependant, les évidences que j'ai rassemblées dans mon travail avec les paysans de Santiago suggèrent que le flux d'émigrants cap-verdiens et les choses qu'ils envoient dans leurs communautés d'origine contribuent davantage à encourager et à inciter au maintien des valeurs et des pratiques traditionnelles qu'à introduire des changements ou provoquer des ruptures dans leurs communautés d'origine (Trajano Filho, 2009, 2012). Quelque chose de similaire est présent dans l'histoire de Germano Almeida. Les nouvelles valeurs acquises dans l'émigration par André n'ont pas duré une semaine, avant de commencer à s'effondrer. Et en vingt-et-un jours, une tradition essentialisée dans la vision des agents publics qui ont présidé au procès d'André, pour le meilleur ou pour le pire, a fait valoir le poids de leur main. Cela me semble contredire les études transnationales qui soulignent le potentiel de changement apporté par les émigrants. Mais, si on suit la pensée de Lisa Åkesson (2015), on voit que la capacité des rapatriés à induire des changements économiques dans leur pays d'origine dépend de certaines contraintes sociales, ainsi que de certains traits de leur psychologie individuelle et enfin du hasard. En ce qui concerne les contraintes sociales, l'auteure note que les rapatriés doivent rentrer avec un certain capital économique accumulé qui, en raison de leur faible qualification professionnelle, nécessite beaucoup de temps d'émigration. En outre, ils doivent avoir acquis un certain capital social à l'étranger, comme

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<sup>28</sup> Je rappelle que, dans sa vie à Lisbonne, André attachait peu de valeur aux liens conjugaux. Il vivait avec une autre Cap-Verdienne et se souvenait à peine de la femme qu'il avait laissée à Santiago.

l'apprentissage de nouvelles techniques, des pratiques professionnelles et des connaissances générales, ainsi qu'un certain capital culturel au-delà de ce qu'ils avaient lors de leur migration.

L'histoire racontée dans *Os Dois Irmãos* ne fait pas référence à la capacité d'entrepreneuriat économique du rapatrié André. Elle a pour thème la fragilité des valeurs modernes qui lui ont été inculquées au cours de ses trois années de vie à Lisbonne. Vingt-et-un jours, c'est le temps qu'il a fallu à André pour tuer le frère qu'il aimait tant, poussé par l'irrésistible force de l'opinion publique et enivré par l'alcool des tavernes de la ville de Praia. Ce mode de fonctionnement des valeurs dans l'univers paysan est pleinement compatible avec la structure de reproduction de la société créole qui a émergé dans l'archipel à partir de la rencontre entre Portugais et Africains. Il exprime une identité profonde entre la syntaxe culturelle créole et celle de la culture politique panafricaine. J'argumente que l'émigré qui revient ou qui envoie de l'argent et des cadeaux à ses proches représente, dans le domaine de la reproduction sociale, l'équivalent créole des hommes de la frontière dans les sociétés africaines (Kopytoff, 1987). Il est le produit des mêmes forces structurelles qui en Afrique, pour des raisons historiques et des motivations ethnographiques différentes, poussent les gens à quitter leurs communautés. Et là comme ici, selon le modèle des frontières, il cherche à reproduire un mode de vie préexistant. C'est pourquoi sa capacité à adopter de nouvelles valeurs dans son pays est limitée.

Inspiré par Meyer Fortes (1974), je pense que l'histoire racontée nous dit que la tragédie vécue par André est associée à une certaine conception du devenir qui a pour modèle primordial le mythe d'Œdipe.<sup>29</sup> Cela a du sens grâce à la catégorie cosmologique Destin, qui opère presque partout dans le monde et pas seulement parmi ceux qui prétendent être des héritiers de la tradition grecque. La tragédie qui accable Œdipe ne résulte pas d'une faute ou d'une erreur de lui (le parricide). Son acte est commis par inadvertance, il est littéralement contraint de le commettre par une force dont le fonctionnement dépasse les connaissances et la volonté de l'homme. C'est « une puissance impersonnelle, supérieure à la fois aux hommes et aux dieux, image [...] du pouvoir de la nature exerçant sa nécessité et sa loi » (Fortes 1974 : 44). Mais cela fait aussi partie de ce stock de biens et de maux qui lui a été réservé dans la vie. En ce sens, le destin d'Œdipe est aussi l'un de ses dons naturels, comme sa beauté et ses talents, et ce don est en partie déterminé par le destin de ses parents, car la vie du fils est un prolongement de la vie de ses parents.<sup>30</sup> Comme dans la tragédie d'Œdipe, André ne pouvait rien faire pour se débarrasser de son devenir tragique et prédit. Tout le monde le savait : lui, João, Maria Joana, le père et la mère, tout le village. Le destin d'André le conduisait irrévocablement à remplir le mandat populaire et à tuer son frère, ce qui était en partie déterminé par le sort de ses parents, par le silence de sa mère et par la vie austère et intransigeante régie par la religiosité doctrinale de son père.

Cette vision fataliste du devenir et cette perception essentialisée et naturalisée de la culture et de la tradition, qui semblent à l'abri du changement, sont des caractéristiques chères à la dimension de la culture populaire dans sa lutte récurrente pour affirmer son authenticité dans un monde en perpétuelle mutation. Il s'agit d'un monde rempli de contradictions aiguës qui paradoxalement créent des banalités menaçantes et mettent en suspension, quand elles ne remettent pas en cause, toutes les authenticités dès qu'elles sont affirmées. Du point de vue de la culture populaire, il est courant de percevoir la culture et la tradition comme des entités statiques qui promeuvent des devenirs décrits comme des destins annoncés et irrémédiables, soulignent des valeurs jugées immuables, entraînent des résultats irréfutables et inévitables, créent des mandats populaires irrévocables et punissent avec un mépris éternel ceux qui ne s'inclinent pas devant elles. Ainsi, les meilleurs

29 En amenant Œdipe à l'analyse, je n'ai pas l'intention de reprendre des discussions anachroniques entre anthropologie et psychanalyse, comme pourrait le prétendre un lecteur peu attentif. Je m'intéresse à Œdipe moins pour les complexes psychologiques constitués autour des pulsions sexuelles et plus pour les possibilités d'inscrire le devenir dans les structures sociales. Ce n'est pas par hasard que ma source d'inspiration, Meyer Fortes, est un anthropologue social qui s'est consacré à l'étude des structures sociales et non pas de vedettes de l'anthropologie culturelle américaine telles que Ruth Benedict ou Margaret Mead.

30 Tel que les destins tragiques d'Étéocle et de Polynice ont été partiellement déterminés par ceux de leurs parents : Œdipe et Jocaste.

exemplaires de culture populaire (les plus « authentiques ») représentent et évoquent toute la culture d'une collectivité. Ces mondes imaginés, dotés d'une intense aura d'authenticité, sont tellement essentialisés et naturalisés que l'idée de culture (au pluriel) qui les sous-tend semble ressembler fortement à celle de race (également au pluriel) – une entité culturelle située en dehors de la culture. Dans ces mondes imaginés, les différences seraient pratiquement insurmontables. Du point de vue de la culture populaire, la race, la tradition et la culture elle-même sont des forces primordiales, immuables et fatalistes, dont les impératifs doivent être respectés. Les destins décrits dans le texte de Germano Almeida sont œdipiens, produits de dispositions situées au-delà des individus, sur lesquels ils n'ont aucun contrôle. Et les moments de liberté prévus par Fabian (1998) pour la culture populaire ne sont ici que de brefs moments. Dans le cas de *Os Dois Irmãos*, il a duré exactement vingt-et-un jours et vingt-deux nuits.

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# Introduction

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The world has become a difficult place to study: fragmented, polarised, fast-changing, distrustful and savagely unequal. Ethnography is especially well-placed to grapple with our alienating worlds in turbulent times because it encourages adaptability. Grand universalising theories about cultural practices and socio-political action in different places have long been seen as intellectually untenable with decades of postmodernism, but we do not need to give up painting in big and small strokes on a wide canvas. The study of governance institutions is an entrypoint into researching the relationship between localities and wider worlds (regions, nations, cities) and processes (inequality, state-society relations, violence). Ethnographers excel at articulating how the everyday work of politics manifests resonantly and comparatively across these different levels and within various institutions.

Ethnography encourages us to compile rich accounts out of the plural perspectives of those who are responsible for breathing life into politics. We look at how social actors create, reproduce or disrupt institutional practices and values; meanings through rituals and symbols; and endless configurations of formal and informal power. Ethnographers have to develop subtle research strategies to understand: the diversity within and between different groups and the conflicts this generates; the disputed views and the way they are communicated; the formal and informal rules that limit the possibilities of action of the different actors and groups; the opacity of relations legitimized by hierarchies; the rhythms of work that require individual and group navigation of time and space; the reasons behind institutional efficiency/inefficiency; and also the criteria and values used to consider certain processes and institutions efficient or not. Thus, the inquiries into different bureaucratic-administrative contexts as presented in the articles in this dossier are rooted in the search to deepen our understanding of production itineraries and management of government policies in their material, practical and symbolic dimensions.

This depth and focus on connections in ethnographic research is possible in part because ethnography focuses on everyday practices from close up. Researchers are forced to be innovative – they even change with the social, economic, political and cultural worlds they are studying (Tim Ingold, 2018). But also ethnographers, especially those from the relatively more sparsely populated discipline of anthropology, are always in conversation with other disciplines from (and with) whom we can study a range of theoretical perspectives. We are usually both reflexive and capable of a mix of close-up immersion and detachment, or ‘involved detachment’ as the sociologist Norbert Elias (1987) put it, so ethnography always requires a process of shapeshifting propelled by curiosity. To theorize about people, an ethnographer will be continually navigating difference and resonance: ‘Encountering the foreign commences a dialogic process of (always only ever partial) adaptive transformation that constitutes resonant experience’(Rosa, 2019: 185).

The articles in this dossier focus on the institutions or social organizations that constitute the centers of power, that is, that have as their ‘mission’ the administrative, economic, legislative, political or legal arbitration of governance. Ethnographers’ research into such governance institutions is usually complex, especially if the intellectual puzzles arise out of entanglements rather than elusive linear causality and the scholars are aspiring to be rigorous, as they are in this dossier. The challenges of doing ethnography in centers of power are an essential feature of the papers presented. The collected works give an overview of obstacles, issues, problems and discoveries derived from the insertion of the anthropologist (or equivalent) into her environment of study in contemporary societies.

We learn about the strategies used by researchers to get the data, develop the analytical frame and create a reflection on these environments as spaces of production of meanings that are always in dispute, but under the appearance of fixity projected by the extended temporality of the institutions. The documents that they study can be viewed as artifacts enrolled in political, social and cultural relations; the barriers to access constitute data that can be framed as expressions of the institutional structure and inflexibility; and the rituals, routines and languages show multiple strategies for social engagement in political processes. The difficulties of doing such research often becomes a core part of the study itself.

The 15 articles are divided in three different spheres of political action or axis for reflection about power: a) **Legislatures**, as the main focus of representation and political discourse in democratic societies; b) **Governance and practices of government**, which comprises the production of the State and its rules and rituals; and c) **Police, violence and territorialities**, focusing on relations between social and political actors and the institutions dedicated to coercion and security.

## a) Legislatures

The first part of this dossier comprises four papers that have different approaches to understand the legal, administrative, political and symbolic processes that occur inside legislatures in the last decade. The ethnographical focus on the way that Brazilian representatives, local and national, build their relationships with citizens is closely linked to an intensive study of rituals and practices of collective action in these institutions, all viewed within the context of the rise of the far-right conservatism in the Brazilian political context. We depart from a local perspective with Campos and Hoyler, in a paper that examines the awarding of commendations in the São Paulo municipal legislature. As the authors have highlighted, the granting of commendations is seen at the interface between politicians and society, constituting “a highly ritualized practice, reflecting its importance in the management of social prestige and in political disputes over official history” (Campos; Hoyler, 2023, in this issue). Analyzing the institutional process with an inside-view and inspiration from the para-site methodology of George Marcus, Campos and Hoyler reflect on the main function of bureaucrats to collect the signatures, a key stage of the practice, and a way to enact the *agreement* as “an informal set of rules

of conduct and institutions that operates in the legislature, producing predictability amid the competition over resources” (Campos; Hoyler, 2023, in this issue).

The second paper shifts the focus to the Brazilian National Congress, more specifically, to the Chamber of Deputies, where Dalla Costa studies the documents produced by the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (PCI) that investigated the formerly named National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) and the National Institute for Colonisation and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) in their attributions of demarcating Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands, respectively. Held between 2015 and 2017, this PCI was established by the *Ruralista* caucus, a group that represents the interests of agribusiness inside Congress. Worried about the conflict between the agenda of agribusiness and the democratization of access to land, the author emphasizes the role of anthropology in demarcation processes of Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands and the questioning of this field of knowledge during the legislative process of the PCI.

Luna also looks inside the Brazilian Congress, exploring the disputes around sexual diversity and abortion in the first two years of Bolsonaro’s government (2019-2020). The election of Jair Bolsonaro as a representative of the extreme far-right showed the process of the construction of conservatism as an important political force in Brazil during the last decade. Using parliamentary discourses and legislative propositions as empirical sources, the paper discusses the Legislature’s dynamics through its conflicts and tensions. The backlash against legal abortion and gender rights conforms to the ‘sexual war’, a dimension of cultural wars expressed by parliamentarians from the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies.

Finally, the article by Aragão presents ethnographic notes on the performances of a group of parliamentarians in the Chamber of Deputies in the years of 2019-2023. Identified with the universe of Bolsonaroism, the actions of these representatives encompass diverse elements from the so-called Brazilian ‘new right’ and conservatism. To approach Bolsonaroism “as a complex set of elements containing different ideas and whose main political reference is the figure of Jair Bolsonaro” (Aragão, 2023, in this issue), the author presents two episodes to situate this empirical universe. The first one shows a complaint submitted to the Parliamentary Ethics and Decorum Council in order to analyze the formation of the Bolsonaroist Bloc. The second situation centers on the debate surrounding a bill about the Commission on Human Rights and Minorities. Both are used to show the way neoconservatists articulate their demands and performances inside the Brazilian Congress.

## **b) Governance and practices of government**

The seven articles that follow in this part of the dossier deal with the management of the state apparatus. In different situations, the authors seek to understand the ‘State’ through its agents, the different interests that move them, their practices and strategies of struggle, and the dispositifs of power that operate in exceptional events or daily routines. Therefore, they research into the processes by which the complex mesh of people and institutions of government is fabricated, and transformed into a univocal, ahistorical, and unchangeable entity: the State (Sharma and Gupta, 2006).

Bóris Maia investigates the preparation of candidates for the public function of tax auditor, which in Brazil requires approval in a highly competitive public selection. Focusing on a classic issue of political science and sociology, the recruitment and training of bureaucratic elites, Maia developed his ethnography on two of the range of courses that promise to better qualify those who aspire to become part of this prestigious and well-paid body of state officials. He did not aim to evaluate the objective knowledge of the different classes, but rather the subjectivity formation of these officials in the training process for entering the formal structure of the State. The author mobilized and articulated the literature on institutions and the State with anthropological studies on learning and cognition. Thus, the reader can apprehend the permeability of state borders (Mitchell, 1991) since bureaucratic subjection and the necessary internalization of a certain ‘civic

culture' precede the rites of institution of the state officials. In addition, the article demonstrates how, in the teacher-student interaction, this 'bureaucratic technician' institutional identity is defined in contrast to other social belongings considered of lesser value, both through hierarchical distinctions from other citizens and the rejection of politicians and politics.

Hernán Garcia moves us from the boundaries between 'State' and 'Society', which Maia's research relativizes, to the triple border between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. He investigated the border control practices between Argentina and Brazil in the Iguazu Border Center (Argentina) during the coronavirus pandemic. He carried out participant observation, informal conversations, structured interviews with state agents from the various institutions responsible for control in Iguazú, as well as a mapping of official documents and press articles about the closure of the border in 2020 and the successive attempts to open it in 2021. Garcia, thus, is inserted in the exercise of the sovereign power of the State (Foucault, 2007), its practices to guarantee territorial limits and the circulation of goods and people through many regulations but, above all, through the permanent possibility of the legitimate use of physical violence. He guides us into understanding how a complex and dynamic world of relationships configures the political-administrative borders of a modern national state.

The Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights during Bolsonaro's far-right government is highlighted in Eliane Reis Brandão's article. By analysing the conservative strategies for managing teenage pregnancy, she presents us with the various technologies of government and moralities used to generate and monitor specific reproductive behaviours. Under the command of Pastor Damares, the Ministry's work erased adolescent sexuality and confined it to the female role in family building. Through an ethnography of a vast corpus of documents (produced by officials and civil society organizations), Brandão demonstrates how it was possible to insert these strategies for controlling the sexuality of young people into a broader political horizon. Between 2019 and 2022 these government health policies were rationalized by two claims: (a) responding to the physical and emotional risk of 'early pregnancy', and (b) a political-moral agenda to combat 'gender ideology', blamed for the weakening of family ties. The article reveals a multiplication of disciplinary artifacts used by the government on young bodies, foreseen and already underway, in the articulation between an anatomo-politics of bodies and a biopolitics of populations. In this way, it allows a specific updating of the dispositif of sexuality, analysed by Foucault in relation to the beginning of the Victorian era, based on the contemporary Brazilian context.

Another government policy enacted while President Bolsonaro was in office is the focus of Ramos et al. Brazilians watched the governance conflicts over sanitation in astonishment, more specifically over ensuring access to water for the most vulnerable populations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the limitations of the context, the authors conducted a virtual ethnography of encounters between different government actors, the private sector, civil organizations, higher education institutions as well as social movements on Internet platforms. They observed that hygiene practices were a consensus in action. This was a contrast to the positions on the efficacy of the vaccine and chloroquine, which witnessed an opposition between, on the one hand, agents and politicians linked to the government (including the President) and, on the other, health experts and civil society organizations. If all agreed on the efficacy of 'washing hands' to prevent the Coronavirus, a controversy was established in the discussion about who would be responsible for resolving the historical deficit of water supply in Brazil which had suddenly become urgent due to the pandemic. In order to understand this political and scientific configuration of conflicts, the authors create a theoretical dialogue influenced by the sociology of science and technology in their explanation between knowledge and power, and between science, politics, and society. In this way, they depict the woven networks in which the different subjects were located and from which they communicated their positions in the ongoing processes and events, managing interests and values in the disputes over the concepts of 'crisis' and 'emergency' and over the responsibility for solving the 'infrastructure problem'.

The interpellations between science and politics are researched by Valeria Ojeda in another context: the construction and implementation of a housing program in an Argentinian province. Through her insertion into the Neighbourhood Improvement Program as a manager, she was in a position to highlight the reflexivity of her experience of being both academic and practitioner during this study. In her ethnographic account, she writes about the tensions that arose out of the necessary reconfiguration of an academic *habitus* (with its specific knowledge, time, and objectives) for another professional *habitus* (managerial) in the design and promotion of a housing policy with social and infrastructure dimensions. The inclusion of ‘participatory methodologies’ in the housing policy development by the new academic actors, gave voice to the ‘target population’ (a term from the institutional language of public policies), allowing them to act as ‘citizens’ in the program. There were many challenges in dealing with disputes between both (a) management, whether social management (social scientists and social workers) and technical management (engineers and bureaucrats), electoral management and public governance, old workers and newcomers, and (b) the coordination of social participation to develop and implement the policy in question. By also considering the different workers involved in the Program, his ethnography presented us with the “bones, flesh and spirit of this monster called the State” (Ojeda, 2023, in this issue).

The exercise of “participatory citizenship” in health governance in a municipality in northeastern Brazil is the axis upon which Andrea Cornwall, Silvia Coelho and Nelson Delgado reflect on the importance of ethnography as a research method for understanding political institutions. The article describes the multidisciplinary research project called Critical Look, the different social insertions of its subjects, and the productivity of their presence and of the ‘ethnographic encounter’ in revealing participatory governance in its various dimensions. By distancing themselves from the normative discussion of what social participation must be, they enable the reader to understand the participatory dynamic as an arena in which agendas are negotiated, demands are presented, redefined, and achieve greater or lesser success depending on the context, social position, political articulation and rhetorical skill of those who speak. Through participant observation, they outline a permanent process of making and remaking democracy by multiple articulations between old and new actors and practices.

The investigation of health governance in northeastern Brazil is the empirical basis for the authors who close the section on governance and government practices. Lázaro et al. acted simultaneously as researchers and fiscal auditors in the field of research on public health units. This dual role was important to understand the intertwining in management and decision-making, between the rules of administration and political and private dynamics. They are, therefore, part of the ethnographies carried out by anthropologists who are embedded within the world under investigation (see Ojeda in this dossier) that has been proliferating in recent decades. They face the challenges specific to this type of insertion (researcher-professional) and are able to ethically and productively explore auditing as an ethnographic field. The authors present bureaucratic and power dynamics and self-interested action in administrative activities, reflecting on the “time of politics” (guided by electoral rituals) and the political and private connections that overlap daily with the normative hierarchy of public management. In this tangle of spaces and times (Palmeira and Heredia, 1994; Teixeira and Chaves, 2004), the authors inquire into subjects’ perspective and dialogue with classic and contemporary authors of anthropology, sociology and history. Thus, they outline how the complexity of the routine of government defy the dichotomies: “politics versus administration; attention versus normative inattention; public versus private; disinterested versus interested; formal versus informal; collective interests versus patrimonialism” (Lázaro et al., 2023, in this issue).

### **c) Police, violence and territorialities**

The four papers on violence and security share in common an interest in theories of ethnographic method and are all in conversation with other disciplines: Rodrigues is concerned with both geography and history; Renoldi compares the inquiry of an anthropology with a police investigation; Dos Santos describes the approach as anthropology and social psychology combined; while Abreu is part anthropologist, part legal scholar and part philosopher. Between them they offer highly innovative approaches for studying worlds full of secrets, coercion and fear.

'Police places' is about policing practices in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro. Rodrigues' starting point is that it is difficult to get access to police, who tend to work in secrecy, and especially in Brazil where accountability from the police to civil society tends to be low. In response to this challenge he finds a mode of inquiry that fits the context beautifully. He goes into police places, or a constellation of social relations that emerge out of interacting with the police, with his interlocutors. By doing walking ethnography with an interlocutor, who acts like a guide into the world of policing, he finds a way to explore this center of power around the police. In his way of accompanying people, whether military police recruits as they prepared for exams or more recently one police trainee (Pablo) in a walk around his neighborhood, he experiments with method. As Pablo becomes his guide of networks, moral codes, shared memories and spaces, we are reminded how anthropologists, or other ethnographers, have uneven relationships with those they study. Unlike the artificial evenness in a researcher's relationship with those filling out a survey, an ethnographer develops temporary, or sometimes even permanent, professional intimacy with a few. Through just one of them, Pablo and his stories, we get to know a huge cast of characters related to the police-connected networks.

Renoldi's anthropology of investigations by the Federal Police in a metropolis of Brazil is about the form of secrets, and how the police look for clues, connections and contradictions, rather than the content of secret findings. The similarities and differences between anthropologist and police officer are illuminating for understanding both processes of inquiry. They have in common that they are interested in the motivation of their informants because the quality of the link between them (researcher and researched), and the information they obtain, will depend on informants' desires, worries and aspirations. On the other hand, the power of the police – to show aggression, use stealth and conceal what they find – is in stark contrast to the constraints put on ethnographers. The difference in epistemologies chime with the relative power of the two groups as well: the police treat the truths they find with certainty, displacing subjects as objects, while anthropologists put factual truth into a peripheral place to make way for creating networks of relationships within which they discover de-centred truths. When they meet the police as interlocutors, there is an inherent conflict because the police see their own role as interrupting illegal action while they view anthropologists as interrupting the process of enforcement. The anthropologist is left in the awkward position of observing what they often deem to be unfair practices but at least being able to report on them in terms of form if not content.

In Dos Santos's exploration of a trauma hospital in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil, we learn about how families are affected by armed conflict and how different victims are treated by medical professionals. Researchers and practitioners have neglected the families of victims and how they experience loss and 'death management', perhaps under-estimating the level of trauma that is provoked by their loss but also the way they are treated. It is not only victims of violence who are expected to be mute and secluded to get good treatment, especially if they are black, as if the violence they have suffered needs to be contained, but this is true for their families too. If the homicide victim is seen as transgressive, then the family will tend to get less access to specialist and timely knowledge about the health of their relative. The author tells us about a specific young man in intensive care, who professionals assumed was involved in crime, when in fact he was shielding his brother from execution. By association their family were treated with brutality. One physician gave an update by saying about their loved-one, "everything that could go wrong has gone wrong with him..."



The intestine is rotten, but the head is preserved” (Dos Santos 2023, in this issue). It was only with time that the medical professionals acquired the capacity to be more considerate and detailed in their reports. It is not only young black male poor men involved in violence whose trauma is overlooked, but even those caught in the cross-fire, and their relatives, who are also guilty until proved innocent if from poor and black communities.

The final article by Abreu paints an expansive ethnographic picture of the relationship between law and politics in Brazil. They constitute each other, while one negates the existence, substance and legitimacy of the other, with law seeing politics as a form of contamination; “they thus dialogue in silence” (Abreu 2023, in this issue). How does this come about? Abreu’s analysis emerges out of ethnographic research in a small town in Bahia state from 1988, northeastern Brazil, then investigating the National Congress in Brasília since 1994, and more recently through the study of law. Out of these three phases of experience, he challenges various hierarchies including the assumption that geographical distance from the capital translates into alienation, as it may be the metropolitan centers that look to the West, and especially its laws, that are out of touch. In the small town, the ethos of helping others and eschewing individualistic self-interest, meant that they saw law as the expression of those in power interfering. In the metropolis, they complain about the population ignoring laws. So the dialogue between the two is one of estrangement. As far as politics is concerned, in Brazil there are two different types of exchange: the longer-term process of gift-giving and debt accumulation and shorter-term bargains, both with a complex and often conflicting range of interests, and it would be more sensible to understand this logic rather than assume that the self-interested individualism of the West should be emulated. Like many of the articles in this dossier, this has wider potentially decolonizing significance. Ethnography can help us see more in the connections and contradictions between fields of study in different parts of the globe.

We might extend Abreu’s resistance to such universalising ‘travelling rationalities’ that circulate with particular energy in the West, as David Mosse (2011) called them within the context of international development, to an appreciation of vernacular methodological approaches to the study of governance institutions. US political science in particular has suffered a retrenchment to taking seriously only narrow quantitative approaches that are perceived to be more reliable and rigorous than emergent, holistically-inclined and multi-disciplinary theories of method (Taylor-Robinson, Crewe and Martin, 2022). Decolonizing the global community of scholars is an urgent challenge not just for the sake of a stronger academia but because democracy benefits from critical and in-depth scrutiny by diverse academics (Crewe, 2021, p. 343). The articles in this dossier demonstrate the power of ethnography as developed by mainly Brazilian anthropologists and the importance of the in-depth scrutiny of the state. We invite the rest of the global community of ethnographers of governance institutions to learn from them.

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# Itineraries and forms of management in the awarding of commendations by São Paulo municipal councillors: an exercise in *researching with*

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## Abstract

This article examines the awarding of commendations in the São Paulo municipal legislature. Seen at the interface between politicians and society, the granting of commendations is a highly ritualized practice, reflecting its importance in the management of social prestige and in political disputes over official history. However, the practice is little ritualized internally to the extent that one of its key stages, the collection of signatures, is performed by bureaucrats. This practice represents an organizational enactment of the *agreement*, an informal set of rules of conduct and institutions that operates in the legislature, producing predictability amid the competition over resources. In this arrangement, bureaucrats play a leading role in producing the boundaries between the dimensions of cooperation and political dispute, contributing to maintenance of the agreement. Inspired by the para-site methodology of George Marcus, which aims to afford the ethnographer better access to spaces of power, the study highlights what we call a method of *researching with*.

**Keywords:** Bureaucracy; legislative; rituals; commendations; para-site ethnography.

# Itinerários e manejos da produção de honrarias por vereadores em São Paulo: um exercício de *pesquisar com*

## Resumo

Este artigo examina a concessão de comendas no legislativo municipal de São Paulo. Vista na interface entre políticos e sociedade, a concessão de comendas é uma prática altamente ritualizada, refletindo sua importância na gestão do prestígio social e nas disputas políticas ao longo da história oficial. No entanto, a prática é pouco ritualizada internamente, na medida em que uma de suas principais etapas, a coleta de assinaturas, é realizada por burocratas. Essa prática representa uma promulgação organizacional do acordo, um conjunto informal de regras de conduta e instituições que operam no legislativo, produzindo previsibilidade em meio à competição por recursos. Nesse arranjo, os burocratas desempenham um papel preponderante na produção dos limites entre as dimensões da cooperação e da disputa política, contribuindo para a manutenção do acordo. Inspirado na metodologia *para-sítio* de George Marcus, que visa proporcionar ao etnógrafo um melhor acesso aos espaços de poder, o estudo destaca o que chamamos de método de *pesquisar com*.

**Palavras-chave:** burocracia; legislativo; rituais; homenagens; etnografia para-site.

# Itineraries and forms of management in the awarding of commendations by São Paulo municipal councillors: an exercise in *researching with*

Pedro Campos and Telma Hoyler

In 2013, the start of the Workers' Party (PT) government in São Paulo city, a news story caused uproar among party activists and progressive voters on social media. A proposal for commendation had been presented by the São Paulo councillor Captain Telhada in honour of the Tobias de Aguiar Ostensive Patrols (ROTA) force,<sup>1</sup> the São Paulo state military police shock troop. Originally created under the military dictatorship (1964-1985) to protect banks, then the targets of clandestine groups opposing the regime, the troop's history – its missions later switched to suppressing 'common crimes' (Macedo, 2019) – has been marked by systematic human rights abuses. The social media uproar arose from the fact that the proposal to award the commendation had been signed by seven of the eleven councillors from PT, a centre-left party with a long history of defending human rights and condemning police brutality. Questioned by the press about their decision, the PT councillors initially claimed to have signed the document without reading it.

As they came under mounting pressure, however, especially following public criticisms made by the party's sole female councillor, who had not signed the document, as well as clashes with the progressive media,<sup>2</sup> the lawmakers eventually asked to withdraw their support for the commendation and subsequently joined forces with the other left-wing councillors campaigning for the commendation to be refused.<sup>3</sup>

Along with city halls (*prefeituras*), municipal councils constitute the public power at local level in the country. Uniquely worldwide, Brazil's municipalities are considered entities of the federation, not subordinate to the federal states. This local level of government is formed through direct elections for both the mayor (*prefeito*) and councillors. Mayors are not subordinate to the municipal councils but depend on them for approval of ordinary legislation at municipal level, including the annual budget and the creation of posts. Meanwhile, the main activities of the municipal councils, our area of concern in this work, are the production and review of legislation and oversight of the Executive Power. Rather than exploring this set of functions, however, we shall focus on a power that frequently passes unnoticed in the public debate, namely the distribution of commendations. In the case of São Paulo municipality, the award of commendations and the realization of the subsequent official ceremonies are highly regulated procedures, governed by the Municipal Organic Law, by the Internal Regulations, by the Council Act that stipulates the physical characteristics of the commendations, and by the forms issued by the ceremonies sector when booking the auditorium and master of ceremonies.

1 In Portuguese: *Rondas Ostensivas Tobias de Aguiar*.

2 For examples of how the topic was covered by the media, see: <http://spressosp.com.br/2013/04/11/vereadores-do-pt-assinaram-projeto-de-telhada-de-homenagem-a-rot-a-troco-do-que/>; <https://www.viomundo.com.br/politica/vereadores.html>; <https://www.redebrasilatual.com.br/politica/2013/03/ban-cada-do-pt-na-camara-de-sao-paulo-retira-apoio-para-projeto-que-homenageia-a-rot-a>; <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2013/09/03/em-sessao-tumultuada-camara-de-vereadores-de-sp-aprova-homenagem-a-rot-a.htm>. Consulted 28 June 2022.

3 This opposition proved unsuccessful, however. ROTA was duly honoured in October 2013 with a Silver Salver, a kind of commendation granted by the São Paulo Municipal Council to institutions.

Behind this set of procedures exists a mode through which the São Paulo Municipal Council seeks to affirm its power, exemplifying what Rivière (1989) called a *political liturgy*: the development of rites and ceremonies designed to promote a separation between those who can speak in the name of a collective (the councillors as its representatives) and everyone else, the public. A series of works has explored the relationship between such rituals and the efforts to constitute the State (see Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1997; Gupta, 2012; Hull, 2012; Riles, 2006)). The role of the rites lies precisely in the effect that their repeated mobilisation and formalization has on constituting a tradition able to sediment an official history as we have argued in Hoyle and Campos (2019) – or, as Pinto (2013: 20) suggests, a form of inventing history, “since they become ‘crystalized’ in official documents and may (or may not) be mobilised to tell the history of cities, the nation, a government or the legislative power.”

As the author further remarks, the importance of the rites also resides in their effects on the actors involved in their production and reproduction. Other works that examine the topic either directly (Pinto, 2013) or indirectly (Kuschnir, 2000; Hoyle, 2022) have shown that, through the distributions of tributes and commendations, councillors make evident who forms part of their political group and try to become more closely associated with those they wish to link with their image. This set of actions, therefore, is among the array of activities responsible for constituting and mobilizing networks of support for politicians and their mandates.

Although highly ritualized at the interface with society, the practice of distributing prestige through tributes and commendations is seldom a topic of controversy within the Legislature itself, where the process is marked by a ‘deritualization’ that transfers its handling to the corps of technical staff, permanently hired through public selection exams, known as personnel (*funcionários*), public servants or, analytically, bureaucrats.

The literature has shown that the more serious a decision is perceived to be by those controlling the rules, the more difficult it is to reach an agreement and, as a consequence, the more ritualized the process becomes (Crewe, 2021). This also means that the same process can be observed through its polar opposite. Along these lines, the case opening the text introduces a more general theme in terms of the production of what we understand as the State: the practices that routinize political decisions and their effects on the behaviour of bureaucrats. After all, how and why do councillors ‘sign without reading’ even those legislative documents produced by their political adversaries?

The first part of this topic – the routinization of political decisions – has been studied in similar form by authors who, for example, explore the effects produced by so-called political technologies (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983) and by the tools of risk analysis (Scherz, 2011): the adoption of instruments, techniques, rites and/or lineages that mask a series of political decisions under the guise of technical neutrality. Here we reach the second part of the theme, namely the way in which the tacit agreement between bureaucrats and councillors – an agreement revealed by the political salience of the example discussed here – shapes the behaviour, practices and routines assumed by the former when given the task of formalizing the documents needed to produce this political function of the Legislature: the distribution of prestige.

More broadly, observation of these relations also allows us to explore a theme central to the agenda of the anthropology of the State: the complex handling of artifacts and signs of state authority. If politics and technique are not set in binary opposition, but continually intermingled and mutually assimilated through their practices of reproduction (Hoag, 2011), what happens during this attempt to routinize political decisions? How is the political component absorbed and interpreted by the career staff of the Municipal Council? Do all its bureaucratic personnel conduct the same procedure using the same ‘technique,’ as the adjective suggests, or do they possess distinct modes of navigating space and time?

The focus on outputs like the commendations themselves, or on the institution of *parliament*, or simply on the individuals operating within it, as observed extensively by some lines of research on the Legislature, overlooks the processes through which relations, connections, affects and languages are produced that lead to the outcomes and artifacts that we observe crystallized in the form of public policies, laws and state documents. The act of ‘signing without reading,’ as the councillors explained their action, far from requiring merely an analysis of the supposedly ‘dysfunctional’ behaviour of parliamentarians in the Brazilian legislature, derives from a relational context that allowed the practice to happen.

To comprehend how and why this event happened, we turn to the itineraries involved in the production and management of a specific practice of material work in the legislature: the collection of signatures in support of commendations, commemorations and other tributes in the municipal council. The scale assumed by this activity, and which therefore underpins the construction of routines for it to be realized, also leads us to examine the legislature not just as an institutional power but as a bureaucracy. In this case too, the boundaries between politics and technique are always porous and continually being redefined.

In some contexts, the occurrence of political decisions is clear, namely those taken within the scope of the competent political authorities, whose decisions can only be reversed either by political decisions (such as a decree issued by the executive or a legislative decree blocking the former) or by judicial appeal. From the standpoint of public policy processes, the decisions of these actors are frequently situated in the final stages, in deliberations about content and form: the mayor signing a decree introducing a policy for sheltering the homeless; lawmakers approving a new Master Plan; members of the Public Prosecutor’s Office launching an investigation into a politician still in office. Surrounding these ‘big’ competences, however, we frequently encounter a series of ‘small’ competences, definable as such either because they require decisions of less individual impact, or because they demand such a large number of decisions that the bureaucracies organize strategies to render these decisions routine.

In the São Paulo Municipal Council, one of these small competences, so to speak, performed in large number, is the collecting of signatures of support for councillors to distribute commendations and tributes. Each councillor has the right to grant up to eight commendations during the legislature, resulting in an average of 100 commendations approved per year (according to data from SPLegis, which systematizes all the legislative output of the São Paulo Municipal Council). For these commendations to be formally accepted, they must contain, as well as the signature of the author of the request, another 36 signatures in support of the initiative. The number may not be appear high but from a material perspective of the work routines involved, this entails the need to collect at least 3,700 signatures annually. The practice of collecting these signatures requires the mobilization of specific skills and competences on the part of the bureaucrats and the sensibility to perceive the continually shifting borders of the informal rules governing the relations between bureaucrats and lawmakers.

Setting out from the limit case that opens the introduction, in this article we analyse how the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats is based on a set of practices and informal rules that sustain the production of this policy, in similar fashion to situations observed in seminal works from the sociology of organisations (Blau, 1955; Selznick, 1966), operating constitutional pacts in the form of informal institutions (in the sense of ‘informal’ formulated by Helmke and Levitsky, 2006). Studying this dimension entailed breaking through the barriers of institutional formality, which itself proves a challenge for researchers since organisations strive to create and preserve these barriers for their own continuity.

The article presents a description of the process of collecting signatures and the interactions between bureaucrats and politicians in the São Paulo Municipal Council, based on the distinct experiences of the two authors, constructed not only at different moments in time but also from different perspectives. The second author is an academic, while the first is a bureaucrat from the municipal council, a direct participant

in the processes described here. This partnership was, in part, a way of overcoming barriers imposed by the institutions to keep sensitive information from public scrutiny. More than this, though, the research was developed within a collective process of seeking paths for living and studying *with* people, as Ingold (2019) argues. Hence, the very construction of the problem and the way we describe it here seeks to confer authority to those subjects whose quotidian activities are linked to the commonplace and mundane questions of life. This is an obviously aspirational endeavour, but even so, it points to a way forward that seeks to reflect, on a minor scale, the commitment to a dialogue between academia and bureaucracy, between researcher and bureaucrat, in the creation of *para-sites*, events of reflexive interaction between individuals from distinct fields. As Deeb and Marcus (2011) propose, this can help us move beyond an epistemological approach based around researcher and object.

The article is organised in three sections in addition to this introduction: the first section discusses the challenge involved in constructing the analyses, and this text in particular, which is drawn from the wealth of phenomena observed by the bureaucrats called *peões* ('labourers') by the Plenary – actors who are frequently forgotten, but who witness from close up the everyday activity of politicians – and on the encounter between the authors' different perspectives. The second section embarks on a detailed description of the process of collecting signatures for commendations, mapping its rhythms, rites, artifacts and actors. Finally, the third section summarizes the argument and discusses a research agenda shared by authors studying entities from the justice system and other legislatures, encouraging them to think about the reproduction of institutional values and practices, as well as the role of the political sensibility of the bureaucrats in the production of the limits between the political dispute and the 'constitutional' consensuses involved in the State's operation.

### **I – *Researching with*: on the construction of this ethnography**

The barriers to access faced by those conducting ethnographic research on elites are relatively well-known: among them we can mention the always-full schedules, the closed doors, the questioning by security guards, the rules with whom, where and for how long one can talk, as Teixeira (2014) systematically describes. This article is the result of an exercise that sought to circumvent this barrier and simultaneously propose a form of doing research in partnership with the 'natives.' After all, it is no novelty to say "we are all natives" (Geertz, 1983).

One of the difficulties here is the constant sensation among researchers of always being slightly distant from where something important is happening. During her doctoral research, especially in 2018 and 2019, Telma Hoyler accompanied the everyday work of the São Paulo Municipal Council (SPMC) with the aim of understanding the institutional dynamic behind the approval of law bills. She noted that other kinds of legislative material, such as commendations and commemorations, although officially recorded as produced by lawmakers (at tribute events and in the databases of the legislature's output), do not appear in the everyday work of the Plenary. At that time, a career bureaucrat of the SPMC, expressing dissatisfaction, said that they themselves had to collect the signatures needed to approve commendations. As the focus of the research was elsewhere at the time, the response appeared satisfactory to her. Yet there remained in the air, almost like a *pulga atrás da orelha*, a 'flea behind the ear,' a persistent itch, the sense of a dynamic existing between lawmakers and the body of bureaucrats from the Council during the sessions that was difficult for her as a researcher to access. After she had presented her research project and it had been formally 'protooled' and processed, having deployed all the icons of academic prestige to obtain permission, Hoyler (2022) gained access to the galleries where the legislative aides – hired by the cabinets, not the permanent staff of the SPMC – watch the Plenary Sessions. Although this area provided an ample view of the hall, this was still not close enough. From this vantage point, an administrative and political routine could be discerned, but missing were many elements



that could give meaning to the repetitions and lacunas involved in this routine. The fact that the aides sat next to her did not know or had no interest in what happened between the bureaucrats and politicians certainly said something about the institutional universe in question, albeit not enough.

The pre-existing affective relationship between the authors and the encounter of both with the literature on the instrumentation of public action (Le Galès & Lascoumes, 2005) were points of convergence that led them, setting out from different places, to develop a shared agenda concerning the problematic of the materiality of the State and, more specifically, the material practices involved in document production. While Hoyler, in her doctorate, explored the theme of legislative production from the perspective of the councillors and their aides, Pedro Campos has long-term experience of legislative production from the viewpoint of the bureaucracy, starting from the period immediately following what was observed by Hoyler. Ten years prior to the publication of this article, he himself had been one of the Plenary's *peões* or 'labourers' as they were called by a colleague from the sector (herself a *peoa*). From this vantage point, he witnessed the daily work of those responsible for the activity and shared their apprehensions, tensions and impressions about living on a quotidian basis so close to those in power, hearing their stories, causes and daily reports, overhearing the intrigues, disputes and open complaints among them – line managers, senior managers and councillors, considered the '55 different bosses' for whom they work – as well as the solutions and the heuristic and handy little rules that they adopted to solve problems, perform their work and determine when a job was well done. Campos was both puzzled and astounded by the way in which his colleagues individually identified the dozens of signatures found on the commendation documents, visually striking artifacts, as can be observed in **Image 1**. The names below the signatures were added by his colleagues.

Image 1 – Sheet of signatures of support for commendations – format 1

APROVADO EM DISCUSSÃO E VOTAÇÃO ÚNICAS. À PROMULGAÇÃO DA MESURA

29 JUN 2009

Folha nº 01 do proc. Nº 02-35 de 09

Presidente Cícero - Ass. Paroquial - 129 455

**CÂMARA MUNICIPAL DE SÃO PAULO**

Gabinete Vereador Jooji Hato

LIDO HOJE 23 JUN. 2009

AS COMISSÕES DE: Constituição, Participação, Educação, Cultura e Esportes

02 - PDL 02 - 0035/2009

Dispõe sobre outorga de Título de Cidadão Paulistano ao Senhor Ignácio Tadayoshi Moriguchi.

Antonio Carlos Rodrigues

A CÂMARA MUNICIPAL DE SÃO PAULO decreta:

Art. 1º - Fica concedido ao Senhor Ignácio Tadayoshi Moriguchi o Título de Cidadão Paulistano.

Art. 2º - A entrega do referido Título, será feita em Sessão Extraordinária para este fim convocada.

Art. 3º - As despesas decorrentes da execução do presente Decreto Legislativo correrão por conta de dotações orçamentárias para este fim destinadas.

Art. 4º - Este Decreto Legislativo entrará em vigor na data de sua publicação, revogadas as disposições em contrário.

23 JUN 2009

Sala das Sessões,

**JOOJI HATO**  
Líder da Bancada do PMDB

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Source: SPLegis

The routinization of political decisions allows us to examine the relationship between the permanent staff and politicians, less studied than the relationship between politicians and the group of aides with commissioned posts or the permanent staff occupying management posts. These are possibly less studied because they are less frequent, given that usually this encounter is mediated by intermediary posts known as medium-level bureaucracy (Cavalcante & Lotta, 2015). Setting out from debates rooted in theory, Hoyler was initially unsure of the relevance of the theme explored in this article: after all, legislatures have a small bureaucracy, meaning they are not the best institutional space to analyse the topic. But when this interaction between technicians and politicians unfolds in the SPMC, what does it tell us about the encounter between the rigidity of the machine and the reality of politics? The stability of the ‘machine,’ as the State is frequently called by the bureaucrats themselves, requires them to possess the capacity to resist the impacts and potential arbitrariness of these interactions. This resistance appears to us like the visible face of the fixity projected by the state bodies. How is this appearance of fixity produced? What are the effects on this stability of the encounters and negotiations between politicians and bureaucrats? The authors arrived at these questions through a dialogical process that brought the professions of ethnographer and bureaucrat into closer proximity.

For Hoyler, as a bureaucrat-researcher, reflecting on these questions gives form to the ontological unease of those working behind the scenes of power, which involves thinking about how the interlocution with political authorities takes place. As a researcher-bureaucrat, there is an obvious concern with the accuracy of information, which provide the motive for a series of conversations held in 2022 with bureaucrats responsible for the process of collecting signatures, most of them colleagues of Campos with whom interpretations and preoccupations were shared, elaborated and re-elaborated. This material was combined with impressions and details taken from the recollections of [first author] and his autobiographical account, which placed lived experience itself under the microscope.

Although the dilemmas faced were not exactly the same as those discussed by authors like Silva (2014) in terms of simultaneously combining ethnographic research and bureaucratic work, doing ethnography in this kind of configuration raises diverse ethical-methodological and even epistemological questions: Can bureaucrats speak for themselves? How does the activity of reflection, more systematic listening and writing participate in the construction of a public identity different to how this professional class is generally perceived? How did Campos come to be perceived in his everyday work and how did this affect the conditions under which the text was produced? How did the prior proximity with Campos affect the perception that Hoyler had of bureaucrats and politicians and how did this affect the research and the disposition to produce it? What and who does this text serve? To what extent can ethnography be a space for bureaucrats (and other classes of professionals) to elaborate their lived experiences?

Thinking about these questions, though still uncertain about our responses, we decided to push on with our efforts, since the text and the exercise involved in its construction pointed toward a form of undertaking research on a mutual basis. This approach devolves authority to the people with whom ethnographers do research and enables analytic and theoretical questions to be formulated on the basis of questions of everyday life, as Ingold (2019) proposes. Taking the author’s lead, ethnography in this case would not serve to explain bureaucratic behaviour but to learn from the life experiences of people situated in different places of the social fabric that interconnects us.

In seeking to deepen our attempts to denormalize the gaze, the para-site method (Marcus, 2000; Maurer, 2005; Deeb & Marcus, 2011) offers a way forward. The term ‘para-site’ is used to describe experiments with spaces orchestrated to promote interaction between the subjects involved in a particular field, looking to develop mutual collaborations between researchers and research subjects who, in the context of their everyday practices, demonstrate an analytic interest and conceptual curiosity evocative of the ethnographer’s mode of thinking. In Hoag’s terms (2011), there exists between the two a complicity with their institutions of

power of origin. Sometimes, though, they are antagonistic towards these institutions or simply sympathetic to those with whom they interact in the workplace who, in the case of street-level bureaucrats, they should control. This collaborative experimentation and reflection with research subjects can help shift the bias of the norms and functions of bureaucratic organisations towards lived experience. The exercises described by Deeb and Marcus (2011) suggest the need for an institutional organisation to this end, albeit one difficult to construct. This text is a venture in this direction and, although lacking more comprehensive institutional backing, points to a form of constructing knowledge through mutual cooperation.

## **II – The process of collecting signatures in support of commendations: some bureaucrats, 55 bosses and an agreement**

We set out from a combined analysis of two perspectives seldom encountered in the study of legislative institutions: the Legislature as a bureaucratic organisation and as an institution that bestows prestige.

From the viewpoint of the distribution of responsibilities and bureaucratic organisation, the Legislature – in any Brazilian town or city – is eclipsed by its local Executive counterpart, the city hall, in terms of size, budget and, consequently, the complexity of their administrations. This applies even to São Paulo, Latin America’s largest city, which has the maximum number of councillors permissible under the Federal Constitution.<sup>4</sup> Even so, a legislature of this size is reflected in the volume of activities performed and documents elaborated and processed annually. Based on the activity reports produced monthly by the Municipal Council, we can note the annual occurrence of hundreds of sessions, including the ordinary and extraordinary committee meetings and those of the Parliamentary Commissions of Inquiry (*Comissões Parlamentares de Inquérito*: CPIs). Turning to the data from the legislative process control system (SPLegis), we can observe that thousands of documents introduced by lawmakers, including law bills, legislative decrees and diverse kinds of petitions, are elaborated, protocolled, catalogued, analysed and archived over the same period. To perform this work, the SPMC possesses a cadre of around two thousand public servants, half of these working for the cabinets and another half distributed among the administrative, parliamentary and communication sectors.

Within this contingent of resources, the focus of our work led us to concentrate on two sectors of the Municipal Council that find themselves on the frontline of legislative processes: the Plenary Support Teams (SGP.21) and the Legislative Process Control (SGP.22). These teams are jointly responsible for receiving and managing documents sent to the Plenary, the highest decision-making body of the Legislature, composed of all the councillors and the venue where the most important deliberations of the legislative proceedings occur – notably, the consideration of legislative proposals and vetoes submitted by the Executive.

Beginning the description of the sectors through their participation in the legislative process, we start with SGP.22, the sector responsible for protocoling legislative proposals – that is, the material councillors present to the Plenary with the purpose of changing and creating rules, such as law bills (*projetos de lei*: PL), draft legislative decrees (*projetos de decreto legislativo*: PDL), draft resolutions (*projetos de resolução*: PR) and draft amendments to organic law (*projetos de emenda à lei orgânica*: PLO), as well as petitions for the Council to pronounce on some event or matter, such as motions, commemorations or condolences, or authorizing the realization of official ceremonies. The protocol is a set of activities that involves receiving a document, conducting a pre-analysis of compliance with a strictly formal set of requirements (hence without judging its merits) in order for them to be received and, if compliant, the recording of the date and time of their entry,

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<sup>4</sup> Each municipality has a maximum number of councillors established by the 1988 Constitution and Constitutional Amendment 58 of 2009, varying from 9 councillors in the case of smaller municipalities of up to 15,000 inhabitants to 55 in the case of municipalities with more than 8 million inhabitants. Only São Paulo with 12,396,372 inhabitants has 55 councillors. The city of Rio de Janeiro, the second most populous in Brazil (6,775,561 according to IBGE’s estimates for 2021), has 53 councillors.

their numbering in accordance with the sequence of documents of the same type, and the registering of this document in the information and process management systems. This is the first stage in the formalization of a proposal. A document cannot be wiped from the records, for example, once it has been registered (*protocolado*).

The activity of protocoling is simple to execute: it requires no specific technical training and can be undertaken by public workers approved in selection exams meeting the minimum requirement of a general high school education. Frequently the work is performed by interns under the supervision of permanent staff. Despite being an activity with a stage (document verification) that demands careful attention to the prerequisites, the combination of strategies involving the specialization of tasks and the distribution of guides with rules (compiled from articles taken from the internal regulations and municipal laws) enables with the routine execution of activities. In this sector, the pace is calm and even tedious. The bureaucrats arrive, sit at their desks, switch on their computers and wait. Work rhythms are defined by the timetable of the Plenary sessions – Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons are the busiest. In the morning and late afternoon and on Mondays and Fridays the work volume is much lower. The main interlocutors with this sector are the councillors' aides, generally responsible for the initial submission of legislative documents, and members of the other sector to be described here, who work directly in the Plenary.

The infrequent occasions when the sector has to work urgently are moments when clashes in municipal politics lead to pressure for prioritization of a protocol, a situation that can be observed, for example, in the dispute between government and opposition over the creation of Parliamentary Commissions of Inquiry (CPIs). Other moments are casuistic, such as the interest of an aide or councillor in presenting a document and being able to receive an attractive round number ('PL 100,' for example) or the like to help promote an initiative. At these moments, the order in which the initiatives are protocolled matters greatly and the 'protocol clock,' an instrument used to stamp and officially record the order of entry of documents, reigns as the absolute arbiter of the order of entry of the initiatives – or at least the bureaucrats rely on this fact to avoid themselves becoming the arbiters.

SGP.21, for its part, is the sector responsible for directly accompanying the activities in the Plenary: its staff organise the agendas of the ordinary and extraordinary sessions (the types of meetings most commonly held), control the list of speakers during the different phases of the sessions, receive motions directly presented in the Plenary by councillors and aides, safeguard the bills that are ready to be voted on or are awaiting a decision from the Plenary on their fate, and perform the activity explored in this article: the collection of signatures from councillors in the Plenary for documents that involve commendations or the realization of ceremonial sessions. The bureaucrats from this sector are among the few permitted to circulate in the Plenary during the sessions and approach the councillors for them to sign the initiatives of their esteemed colleagues.

Until the Covid-19 pandemic, which drove the migration of diverse procedures to digital format, including the presentation of initiatives to be protocolled, such documents were processed entirely on paper. This meant, for example, that the cabinets, when filing a draft piece of legislation (a law, a legislative decree or an amendment to organic law) or a motion, had to take the document signed by the councillor, as well as copies of this document to the protocol office (*sala do protocolo*), to await pre-evaluation of a bureaucrat from SGP.22. The original document was protocolled – a term used to refer to the gesture of applying the digital clock stamp, marking the exact time of the action – and then labelled and registered in the system. The original would proceed normally through the council while the cabinet copy returned to the cabinet, stamped and labelled.

This process occurred with all the initiatives, except for a significant portion of those concerned with the awarding of tributes: the granting of commendations, requests for ceremonial sessions to be held, commemorations and recognitions. This does not include tributes that involve the establishment of commemorative dates or the naming of public roads or facilities, as Pinto (2013) also emphasizes, owing to the simple fact that these cases do not require signatures of 'support.'

Although the Municipal Councils and representative bodies in general are frequently discredited and delegitimized in public discourse,<sup>5</sup> the frequency with which tributes are awarded and celebratory activities held, across the entire political spectrum, indicates that the institution enjoys prestige among diverse social groups and possesses some degree of importance in the symbolic and practical dimensions of everyday life. Even though they may disagree with the actions of councillors or even with the decisions made by its Steering Committee, political groups close to or constituting mandates also reinforce the legitimacy of the São Paulo Municipal Council as a space of political articulation and substantive discussions through the way in which they engage with the tributes, anniversaries and celebrations organized by the council. This process foregrounds the dispute over the meanings of the rites, symbols and distribution of prestige for the construction of the histories of the city, the state and the country, as Pinto (2013) argued in studying the ritualization of the process of distributing tributes and commendations in São Paulo municipality.

Since 2011, when data began to be made openly available for consultation, the SPMC has achieved an average of 156 ceremonial sessions per year, occurring more often than the ordinary sessions – those in which law bills are voted on, as established by the internal regulations. These ceremonial sessions are held for diverse motives: the celebration of commemorative dates on the municipal calendar, the anniversaries of municipal districts, public and private entities, organisations and events, as well as tributes to celebrated figures, leaders and artistic and cultural initiatives, and ceremonies for bestowing honorary titles and institutional awards. In the latter two cases, in just the last ten years, 14 new institutional awards were created and almost 900 commendations were granted to individuals and organisations. The presentation of requests to register commemorations, congratulations, condolences and recognitions are also frequent and attain an average yearly volume of 900, 100 and 25, respectively.

As we mentioned earlier, the types of proposals highlighted here possess a peculiarity: in order for them to be evaluated, they must be presented with a minimum number of so-called *signatures of support*.<sup>6</sup> More significant than this peculiarity is the way in which the council resolved this apparently organisational problem: who collects the signatures of support for these initiatives are the bureaucrats from SGP.<sup>21</sup> rather than the political aides. The bureaucrats would expect the exact opposite to occur considering that these activities are an expression of the political relations that the councillors establish with their own groups and communities of supporters, as well as the fact that a signature of support would signify, in principle, an acquiescence, an agreement, concerning the merit of commemorating an individual or entity. As one of the interviewed bureaucrats responsible for the collection of signatures pointed out: “We always found it strange that this kind of responsibility would fall to the technical sector.”

This initially led us to seek to understand the material aspects of the realization of this activity. Hence we began with the figures: setting out from the annual averages of 900 requests for commemorations, 156 requests for ceremonial sessions, 90 titles of commendation, we arrived at a total of 31,494 signatures<sup>7</sup> to be collected yearly to enable these initiatives, or an average of 572 signatures per councillor.

If the signatures of support were collected by the parliamentary cabinets themselves, the aides or lawmakers would have to approach the other lawmakers one by one in their cabinets or during other activities – ideally in the Municipal Council itself – to persuade them to back the initiative. Certainly it would be impossible for the councillors themselves, with so many activities to perform, to collect such a large volume of signatures. Their

5 See, for example, the report produced by the NGO Transparência Brasil in 2009, which classified 91% of the legislative ‘output’ as irrelevant. Available at <https://www.nossasaopaulo.org.br/portal/files/PLSPTTransparenciaBrasil.pdf>. Consulted 28 June 2022.

6 As stipulated by the Internal Regulations of the Municipal Council, the convocation of ceremonial sessions, when not made directly by the President, requires the endorsement of a third of the councillors (Article 194) while the concession of honorary titles requires the endorsement of two thirds (Articles 347 and 348), which amount to 19 and 37 signatures, respectively from councillors for each application.

7 To obtain this figure, we multiplied the minimum required number of endorsements for each type of document by the annual average volume (commemorations require an absolute majority of councillors, or 28 signatures: the other requirements are described above):  $(900 \times 28) + (156 \times 19) + (90 \times 37)$ .

aides, therefore, would have to collect the signatures either by visiting the cabinets separately or by asking the lawmakers to sign the papers whenever they crossed paths in the corridors, in the Plenary or in meetings of the Committees. Since the Plenary, during the ordinary and extraordinary sessions, is the place where the councillors are most frequently found gathered together, we would witness a tumultuous scene with dozens of aides circulating through the space, approaching lawmakers and collecting the large numbers of signatures needed to submit the requests. The norms of the SPMC thus establish that only a fairly limited number of aides can circulate in the Plenary. The staff from SGP.<sup>21</sup> must collect the signatures for these documents.

We could continue the discussion (and initially we did) by attempting to find an organizational explication for this solution.<sup>8</sup> However, the explanation seems to reside elsewhere: responsibility was transferred to bureaucrats, since the type of activity concerned is defined as ‘uncontroversial’ among the list of those legislative activities covered by what we can simply call, borrowing a term from Pinto (2013), an *agreement* between the councillors. This ‘agreement’ involves a pact on a set of informal rules and norms of conduct that guide and sanction the behaviour of councillors and their relations to the formal rules of the legislative process. In this pact, the commendations are a right of every councillor. In principle, this means that all councillors, in general, and irrespective of their political affiliations, treat the award of commendations as a right of their peers too. On signing the document, therefore, contrary to the generic idea of providing a ‘signature of support’ and thus endorsing the honoured person, there is an acknowledgment of the right of another councillor to present his or her own tributes.

Furthermore, as Kuschnir (2000) argues, here too we can observe an important dimension of reciprocity between councillors: they sign in support of other proposals for tributes and commendations in the anticipation of receiving signatures for their own proposals in return. The topic can also be analysed from the viewpoint of collective action. Best and Vogel (2012) explore the question through the concept of antagonistic cooperation, a situation of collective action in which legislators, although competing among themselves to an extent, seek a balance between cooperation and competition by agreeing on the rules and the ways of applying them, and by cooperating with decision-making.

It is interesting to note that the simple existence of a formal rule does not automatically include it within this agreement. One time, during the period when Hoyler was conducting ethnographic research on the Plenary sessions, a councilman who had recently entered the SPMC successfully included a law bill authored by his political rival on the voting agenda. Then, exploiting a moment of inattentiveness from the councilwoman proposing the bill and other colleagues in the Plenary, he asked the Steering Committee for voting on the legislation to be reversed. In other words, rather than asking for those favourable to remain seated where they were, the custom in symbolic votes, the President of the Committee, granting the request, asked for those opposed to stay put. This led to the rejection of the bill by an overwhelming majority. The case provoked outrage among the councillors, even those considered political adversaries of the councilwoman whose bill had been rejected: although not breaking any formal rule, the ruse had broken the pact considered part of the game, creating an environment unfavourable to the decision-making process itself.

Finally, the fact that the signatures of support for this specific type of proposal are collected by bureaucrats, while collecting signatures of support for a request to open a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry bypasses the bureaucrats entirely, reinforces the idea that the former are not generally a motive for controversy. However, the fact that the tributes are not a controversial question among the councillors does not make the practice of collecting signatures by the SPMC’s bureaucratic staff a neutral activity. It is merely a transfer of a political responsibility to a permanent cadre of public servants. This differs from cases like the one related by Scherz (2011), where we see the deployment of technical solutions that employ a scientific language as tools to

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<sup>8</sup> Something that inevitably threatened to invert the relation of causality in what we observed was whether the high volume of documents had motivated the current form of organisation or whether the current form of organisation had stimulated an increase in the volume of initiatives.

mask the maintenance of decisions difficult for street-level bureaucrats, given that there is no neutral technical argument to justify the transference of the decision to sign a document or not. Hence, the episode recounted in the introduction shows, for example, the risk of signing a document without reading it, relying solely on the 'technical guidance' of the bureaucrats.

Here we can return to SGP.22 to understand how the proposals dependent on signatures of support are received. Rather than protocoling the documents with the use of the digital clock, the sector simply marks the document with a stamp of receipt without recording the exact time it was submitted. As far as the sector staff understand, echoed too in the way that the cabinets present the matter, it is as though the document had not yet been formally received. The stamped copy is no longer proof that the document was processed by the sector and no deadline is set for it to be effectively protocolled. In this state of limbo, in which the documents are no longer in the phase of being drafted by the cabinets but have not yet been 'protocolled' either, the documents are forwarded by SGP.22 to the SGP.21 team, responsible for collecting the signatures. Thereafter, the documents are divided up between the team members for them to circulate through the Plenary during its sessions, approaching the councillors to sign the huge piles of documents. Only after collecting the minimum number of signatures, which varies according to the type of document involved, and after being checked by the person responsible for the collection, are the documents returned to SGP.22, where they are stamped with the protocol clock and assigned a number.

During the Plenary activities, in the ordinary and extraordinary sessions, it is possible to note men in suits (the collection team today is 100% male and mostly young, while the dress code in the council, though much criticized by councilwomen for, among other reasons, failing to even consider the terminology of female formal dress by continuing to demand use of a suit and tie) circulating seriously and sometimes discretely among the councillors, waiting for opportune moments to interrupt an activity, offer a pen, present a pile of papers that they carry in tow and stand ready to remove each sheet of paper from the path of the pen with each signature, allowing this dull work of the councillors to be completed as quickly and smoothly as possible.

For various reasons, this is complicated work that demands attention, discretion and a degree of self-control. The bureaucrats feel under pressure for the process of collecting signatures to not take too long – not only do the cabinets call them to check progress, the councillors in the Plenary may query delays in the process. The councillors – and there are a lot of them – are authority figures who are not always open, affable or even interested in cooperating with an activity. Some do not accept any mistakes being made – such as, for instance, collecting repeated signatures in the same set of documents. The sheets with signatures are visually striking documents that used to evoke something bordering on chaos, looking like a sprawling mass of graffiti tags and slogans (*pixos*)<sup>9</sup> from the urban landscape reproduced on paper, the signatures covering the blank spaces of the sheets in random and improvised manner. This changed about ten years ago when SGP.21 started to produce sheets with reverse sides containing spaces allocated for each councillor's signature. Image 1 depicts this visual chaos while Images 2 and 3 allow us to observe the changes, made at the initiative of the younger members of the sector's bureaucratic staff, which we shall discuss later.

The transformation of the document layouts from Image 2 to Image 3 also reveals the tension present in the relations between bureaucrats and councillors. Image 2 was a proposal that came from the bureaucracy to enhance the legibility of the document and facilitate verification of the signatures. The solution was a grid on the back of the original sheet of the proposal that provided equal space for each councillor's name for them to sign. But this measure failed to impress the politicians: some remarked that it looked like a bingo card, some simply ignored the spaces provided and signed the front of the document, refusing to sign on the back

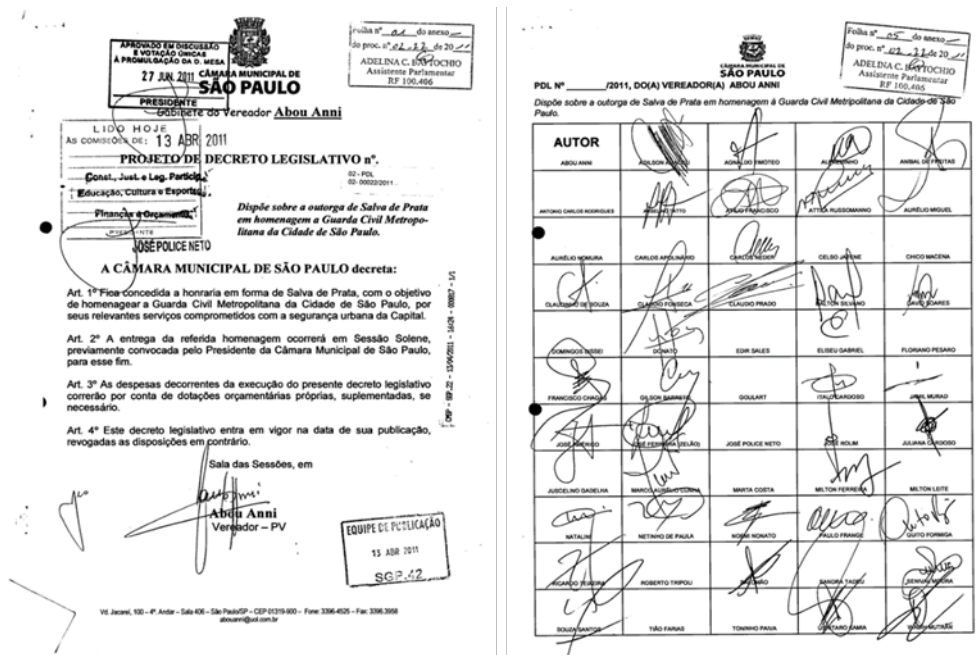
<sup>9</sup> *Pixo*, a term derived from the word *pichação*, graffiti, is a form of graphic expression, traditionally adopted by marginalised urban groups, applied to urban walls and buildings. Frequently compared to graffiti, the *pixo* is characterised by political messages and by the elaboration of unique orthographic styles, sometimes rendering the text illegible to lay passers-by.



(as can be seen in Image 2 with a signature to the left of the author's signature on the document's obverse side), while there were even those who complained directly to the Presidency about the new procedure. The team's solution was to transform the reverse side of signatures into the format seen in Image 3, which distributes the spaces for the signatures in two columns. This layout of the signatures reduced their legibility (we can note that the signatures of the councillors tend to be large, occupying more space on the document than the area provided). This, in turn, increased the attention needed from the councillors to avoid signing in the wrong field and from the bureaucrats to identify who had signed.

In the latter case, in fact, the introduction of the new models resulted in the need to print a grid for the signatures on the reverse of each proposal – on the original signed copy. If a mistake was made or there was some problem with the printing, they would have to solicit a new signed copy from the cabinet of the author of the proposal.

Image 2 - Sheet of signatures of support for commendations – format 2



Source: SPLegis

Image 3 - Sheet of signatures of support for commendations – format 3

**CÂMARA MUNICIPAL DE SÃO PAULO**  
Gabinete do Vereador Aurelio Nomura

PROJETO DE DECRETO LEGISLATIVO 03 - PDL 00-000102013

Disposição sobre a concessão do Título de Cidadão Paulistano ao Professor-Doutor I-sai Watanabe, e de outras providências.

A Câmara Municipal de São Paulo DECRETA:

Art. 1º Fica concedido o Título de Cidadão Paulistano ao Professor-Doutor, I-sai Watanabe, professor titular sênior do Departamento de Anatomia Humana, do Instituto de Ciências Biomédicas da Universidade de São Paulo.

Art. 2º A honraria será conferida em Sessão Solene, a ser convocada pelo Presidente da Câmara Municipal de São Paulo.

Art. 3º As despesas decorrentes da execução deste Decreto Legislativo correrão por conta de dotações orçamentárias próprias, suplementadas se necessário.

Art. 4º Este Decreto Legislativo entrará em vigor na data de sua publicação, revogadas as disposições em contrário.

Sala das Sessões, às Comissões competentes

AURELIO NOMURA  
Vereador

2013

Paulista

Adelina Cícero  
Assistente Técnico  
Registro 100-400

PDL - Disposição sobre a concessão do Título de Cidadão Paulistano ao Professor-Doutor I-sai Watanabe, e de outras providências

1º ADELSON AMARAL	21º ADELSON AMARAL
2º ALDO ALBERTO	22º ADELSON AMARAL
3º ALDO ALBERTO	23º ADELSON AMARAL
4º ALDO ALBERTO	24º ADELSON AMARAL
5º ALDO ALBERTO	25º ADELSON AMARAL
6º ALDO ALBERTO	26º ADELSON AMARAL
7º ALDO ALBERTO	27º ADELSON AMARAL
8º ALDO ALBERTO	28º ADELSON AMARAL
9º ALDO ALBERTO	29º ADELSON AMARAL
10º ALDO ALBERTO	30º ADELSON AMARAL
11º ALDO ALBERTO	31º ADELSON AMARAL
12º ALDO ALBERTO	32º ADELSON AMARAL
13º ALDO ALBERTO	33º ADELSON AMARAL
14º ALDO ALBERTO	34º ADELSON AMARAL
15º ALDO ALBERTO	35º ADELSON AMARAL
16º ALDO ALBERTO	36º ADELSON AMARAL
17º ALDO ALBERTO	37º ADELSON AMARAL
18º ALDO ALBERTO	38º ADELSON AMARAL
19º ALDO ALBERTO	39º ADELSON AMARAL
20º ALDO ALBERTO	40º ADELSON AMARAL

Source: SPLegis

This sector only recently began to be composed mostly of bureaucrats called *estatutários*, hired through public selection exams. Before then, although the administrative regulations stipulated that the senior management always had to be statutory workers, the team was divided between *comissionados* (commissioned staff)<sup>10</sup> and *celetistas* ('CLT-hired' staff).<sup>11</sup> While statutory workers entered the council via approval in public exams, the presence of the *celetistas* and *comissionados* in the sector is linked to their capacity for political articulation – that is, through the relationship with someone close to a councillor, since they depend on the latter for their requests for commissions to be made. In their daily activities, the bureaucrats talk about the internal divisions that ended up separating them into groups according to the modality under which they were hired – the newer and older members of the sector, the more timid and the more extrovert. In a way, this origin also appeared reflected in the comfort or discomfort with which some team members went about the activity of collecting signatures. In the words of one of the interviewees, “most of the time, it was the older staff who collected [the signatures] because they have an almost personal connection to the councillors due to the time spent working at the SPMC.” The older staff not only demonstrate confidence in going about their work, they also show a degree of intimacy with the lawmakers, a different way of behaving when circulating among authorities, exchanging greetings, comments and jokes, something that simply did not occur with the statutory bureaucrats, young men in their early thirties, who exchanged as few words as possible with the lawmakers and gesticulated discretely, avoiding as much as possible interrupting conversations and become involved in the hubbub.

10 The *comissionados* are public workers from the direct and indirect administration and from any level of the Federation, who are 'loaned' by the parent body to perform functions in another body. As a result, they can work in another public entity without giving up their original affiliation (and, very often, the salary and benefits received from the parent body). The practice is widespread in Brazil's public sector and, in the case of the São Paulo Municipal Council, it is fairly common for workers from city hall (the *prefeitura*) to be commissioned in the council, especially since they earn a generous bonus for providing their services in the legislature.

11 Until the 1988 Constitution, which prohibited the modality of direct administration, the council still hired people through contracts under the CLT (Consolidation of Labour Laws) in processes without any guarantee of impartiality. In practice, people who had a relationship with a councillor would ask for a job and ended up being hired and working in the council, frequently performing tasks similar to those of the statutory public workers.

This difference in the individual profiles influenced the rhythm of the work. The draft legislative decrees – the documents considered the most ‘noble’ by the councillors and bureaucrats alike – were mostly handled by the older bureaucrats. The reason alleged for this fact was the expertise needed and, to some extent, the prestige of being the person responsible for the document. These documents require as many as double the number of signatures of the other kinds in order for them to start to be considered. Hence, if the person responsible for the task experiences some difficulty in approaching the lawmakers, the activity can take a long time. Furthermore, each councillor assumes a distinct stance not only in relation to the person collecting the signatures but also in relation to the activity of collecting them. The activity was, however, one of the few of its kind distributed to younger staff when the SPMC’s composition was altered following elections. In the words of one of the interviewed bureaucrats: “At the start of each legislature, we would present ourselves, a certain degree of friendship would be created with the councillors, which meant we already knew who to ask for signatures.”

Most of the time the councillors take the pen offered by the bureaucrat and sign the pile of documents almost automatically, very often while continuing their conversations with aides or other councillors or even while talking on the phone. In other words, they frequently ‘sign without reading.’ There are also those who prefer to examine what they are signing more carefully to decide whether they wish to sign. By taking their time with the documents, however, these politicians are seen by the bureaucrats as too time-consuming to approach – they spend longer analysing each document abstract, selecting those they want to sign, while passing remarks on the others. Over time, the bureaucrats develop a particular intuition concerning those from whom signatures can be obtained more quickly, allowing them to gather the minimum number required for the documents to be protocolled. After all, a councillor who prefers to read the papers carefully may take three, four or even five times longer than someone who simply grabs the pen and signs in the same spot repeatedly until completed. As it is unnecessary for everyone to sign, those who ‘read’ can be avoided.

The knowledge of the bureaucrats, as well as filtering those who sign more quickly, involves recognising the signatures already collected, as we noted earlier. At the end of the workday, if the bureaucrat has been unable to expedite all the documents requiring signatures, he checks the signatures collected to avoid asking a councillor to sign the same set of documents again. This task requires the bureaucrats to know how to identify – on documents similar to those shown in Images 1 to 3 (either with spaces for the signatures already designated, in the case of individual or collective authorship, or without any predefined space for signing) – each of the signatures of the 55 councillors and occasionally their substitutes. This includes remembering that if a substitute signed a set of documents, the office holder cannot sign the document in question should he or she return in the middle of the process.

All these precautions and skills developed by the bureaucrats aim to minimize the risk of frictions with the councillors, not only to avoid hampering the work of the latter, but also to avoid the risk of complaints arising about their own work. Such complaints could ultimately see them transferred to another department. In this eventuality, they could lose the bonus received for supporting the activities of the Plenary, a portion of their monthly pay earned simply for working in the sector. In this situation, we can observe how technical and political risks intersect. The everyday work of the bureaucrats becomes even more difficult considering that the councillors have distinct profiles and the autonomy to press for the transfer of bureaucrats. [First author], who collected signatures in the Plenary just a few times, but has been involved in other sorts of activities there for almost three years, shared his colleagues’ feeling of having 55 bosses in addition to his immediate boss, each with his or her own particularities and, sometimes, conflicting interests, making it difficult to remember their individual preferences.

Each of these pragmatic considerations is incorporated into the form taken by the team's work in a distinct way. This difference also affected the paces and performance of each bureaucrat when collecting signatures, which frequently generated situations in which documents took much longer to be 'protooled' simply because of the person who had been made responsible for collecting them.

Moreover, beyond the pragmatic considerations, in order to maintain an adequate pace of work, political or strategic considerations also form part of the everyday work of the bureaucrats. There were cases in which a public worker knew from prior experience that a particular councillor would not sign documents introduced by another, or that he or she disliked an issue, entity or association mentioned in the document, and, for this reason, avoided presenting it to the councillor. In other cases, due to some urgent situation, pressure from management or from the presidency of the SPMC itself, the documents were distributed to some of the bureaucrats whose resourcefulness provided them with the 'courage' to visit the cabinet of an unfriendly councillor to ask for a missing signature needed during an emergency.

In the dialogues between colleagues, accounts and mutual apprenticeships concerning the tortuous paths of work and even in more heated discussions, the situations were framed as a way of asserting oneself professionally vis-à-vis others. Quickly resolving urgent demands to collect signatures and discerning who may present problems concerning a particular document were ways of showing adroitness and attitude in relation to the councillors. These skills, in turn, allowed some bureaucrats to occupy a prominent place in the hierarchical structure, constructing a particular vision of what it means to perform this work adequately and, therefore, what the functions of a public worker from the sector should be.

From this position of competence, the more experienced staff members, who were not among those with the most stable jobs (*comissionados* and *celetistas*), reaffirmed their permanent position in contrast to the temporary status of the lawmakers. There was an established view, therefore, that bureaucrats – whose job position is stable, meaning that they remain during the changes between each legislature – should also develop a political sensibility, a capacity to discern the political contexts and splits present in the SPMC.

This reality, experienced intensely by [first author] during the period when he worked accompanying the activities of the Plenary, transformed significantly following the implantation of systems for the digital management of documents, called 'electronic processing.' According to the interviews, SGP.21's responsibility for obtaining signatures of support fell. However, this did not mean a solution to the problems potentially arising from the routinization of this activity. As one of the interviewees recounted, in 2020, Councillor Rinaldi Digilio presented a proposal to award a commendation to Michele Bolsonaro, the first lady of the former President Jair Bolsonaro. Once again, the document contained signatures from PT councillors. Unlike the case presented in the introduction, though, this time the rules designed for the electronic processing system had simply omitted the possibility of removing signatures. This meant that the PT councillors remained in the uncomfortable situation of appearing to be guarantors of the qualities of the person being honoured.

According to the interviewee, a formal adoption of this now tacit rule could transform the logic of the commendations, ensuring the right of everyone to present commendations and forcing the Plenary to engage in a public discussion of the merit of those honoured. In his view:

Councillors sign without reading, imagining there won't be any really polemical cases. Approving a commendation in the Plenary is another matter entirely, not everyone succeeds. But once the request is protooled, the opportunity is created to speak publicly in favour or against.

However, the public discomfort of lending support remains. Or as the interviewee put it: "[...] in highly polemical cases, such as that of Michelle Bolsonaro, it's not worth the risk."

### III. Final remarks

When the Municipal Council issues an anniversary tribute or celebration – with the different degrees of political importance of the honoured person – the impression conveyed to society is that the history of the city and the country are a constant matter of dispute. Through tributes, people whose acts were previously seen as undesirable or simply ignored as central elements in the country's formation become recognised – or the opposite, names that were once valorised come to lose credibility. In this sense, tributes constitute important tools for the constructing of history and counter-history.

We have seen that what appears from the viewpoint of public opinion as a dispute over history, determined by the different ideological orientations behind the tributes and the political affiliation of their proponents, actually involves a much more consensual dynamic when seen from the viewpoint of processes within the legislature. Councillors understand that their colleagues have the right to distribute these forms of prestige, in equal numbers, based on what Pinto (2013) calls an *agreement*, which is fulfilled, save in cases of major political salience, as we saw in the case recounted in the introduction.

From diverse angles of analysis, this pact dialogues with the idea of reciprocity present in Kuschmir (2000) through which councillors expect to receive back the same as they concede, or the idea of antagonistic cooperation (Best & Vogel, 2012), a situation of collective action in which legislators, although competing with each other, establish a balance between cooperation and competition by agreeing to the rules and how to use them, and cooperating over the decision-making processes. This creates an environment favourable to the work dynamic, processes and flows in which politicians need to engage for their own legislation to be able to progress.

The opposite of this scenario, which occurs precisely during periods of heightened political tension and polarization between government and opposition, is the paralysis of the legislative process. This practice, in turn, entails the transfer of responsibility for the collection of signatures to bureaucrats, who effectively turn political decisions into routines: who is likely to support a particular tribute, and who will be left out? Or who will assume the risk of guaranteeing the reputation of a particular figure or institution?

The bureaucrats, for their part, acquire knowledge about how to proceed with the collection of signatures through lived experience with politicians and their colleagues. As Hoag (2011) points out, studies of bureaucracies are so dominated by a normative understanding of what bureaucracies must be – from which we can infer the ubiquity of the Weberian perspective of bureaucracies and the near omnipotence of the discourses of bureaucracies about themselves – that it is a challenge even for anthropology to engender a shift in perspective and eschew the question ‘does this bureaucracy function?’ However, these kinds of shifts, as Hoag also emphasizes, offer us other analytic frameworks with which to comprehend the logic of bureaucracies not only as organisations with specific purposes, but also as “life-world[s] populated by actual buildings, specific objects and people with anxieties and dreams” (Hoag & Hull, 2017).

We have sought to comprehend the experiences lived by individuals who circulate within and construct these spaces, affecting and being affected by these organisations over time. This required becoming immersed in the work routines and daily life, in the interactions between individuals and objects, and in the mediation between individuals through objects. In the practice of collecting signatures, the knowledge, skills and sensibilities that the bureaucrats develop – behaviours such as avoiding asking for the signature of a councillor who reads the papers attentively and slowly, so as to optimize their time collecting signatures – indicate the attempt to minimize the risk of frictions with the councillors. In so doing, they reinforce the tacit agreement existing between councillors, thereby revealing their vital role in the production and stretching of the limits between ‘constitutional’ consensuses in the functioning of the State and the agreed dimension of political dispute between the councillors.

Seeking to feed from and dialogue with other research agendas that have helped this discussion mature, we encountered in analyses of the judiciary a consolidated research agenda concerning the effects of the rites, discourses and practices of this power on those under jurisdiction. The creation and mobilization of social categories like ‘minority’ (Vianna, 2014 or ‘disappeared’ (Ferreira, 2011) by jurisdictional practices are examples of how small ‘technical’ competences, which convert the dramas of individuals into case records, affect the life of people in an absolutely political form. Beyond the relation between bureaucrats and individuals outside the State, the observation of the interactions within the state apparatus, that is, the relation between analysts and technicians on one hand and authorities – judges and members of the Public Prosecutor’s Office – on the other can offer new insights and interesting perspectives for our understanding of the effects of the material practices involved in the maintenance or subversion of the forms of producing the justice system.

Finally, we invite readers of this work, researchers interested in the production of more inclusive and non-normative gazes and perspectives concerning the State and its bureaucracies, to assume the establishment of ‘contact zones’ (Deeb & Marcus, 2011) with bureaucrats as a research practice, stimulating a curiosity in the latter about the production of interpretations and analyses based on their own lived experiences, proposing a shift away from the position of a mere informant.

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# FUNAI and INCRA PCI

## reflections on Anthropology and agribusiness

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### Abstract

Between 2015 and 2017, a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (PCI) took place in the Câmara dos Deputados (Brazil's lower house) of the Brazilian National Congress, which investigated the formerly named National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) and the National Institute for Colonisation and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) in their attributions of demarcating lands, Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands, respectively. This PCI was established by the Ruralista caucus, a group that represents the interests of agribusiness inside Congress.

One of the focuses of the PCI was to discuss the role of anthropology in the demarcation processes of Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands, questioning not only the work of anthropologists, but the field of knowledge itself. Through an ethnography of documents (shorthand notes of the meetings and reports presented) and by direct observation, the research that culminated in this article sought to reflect on the anthropological practice related to public policies for the redistribution of land to Indigenous peoples and *Quilombola* communities and their friction with agribusiness interests.

The centrality of the agrarian agenda and the model of territorial development defended by agribusiness clashes with public policies for the democratisation of access to land. The FUNAI-INCRA PCI reveals yet another articulated attempt by agribusiness to establish new benchmarks for these public policies, through the Ruralista caucus, and for this reason anthropology was included in the debate.

**Keywords:** Parliamentary Inquiry Committee; Anthropology of Politics; Brazilian Chamber of Deputies; Ethnography of documents; Rural Caucus.

# CPI da Funai e do Incra – reflexões entre Antropologia e agronegócio

## Resumo

Entre 2015 e 2017 ocorreu, na Câmara dos Deputados do Congresso Nacional, a Comissão Parlamentar de Inquérito (CPI) que investigou a Fundação Nacional do Índio (Funai) e o Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (Incra) nas suas atribuições de demarcação de terras indígenas e quilombolas, respectivamente. Essa CPI foi estabelecida pela bancada ruralista, grupo que representa os interesses do agronegócio dentro do Congresso brasileiro.

Um dos focos da CPI foi discutir o papel da antropologia nos processos de demarcação de terras indígenas e quilombolas, questionando não apenas a atuação de antropólogos/as, mas também a própria área do conhecimento. Por meio de etnografia de documentos (notas taquigráficas das reuniões e relatórios apresentados) e por observação direta, a pesquisa que culminou nesse artigo buscou refletir sobre a prática antropológica relacionada às políticas públicas de redistribuição de terras a povos indígenas e comunidades quilombolas e seus atritos com os interesses do agronegócio.

A centralidade da pauta fundiária e do modelo de desenvolvimento territorial defendido pelo agronegócio colidem com as políticas públicas de democratização do acesso à terra. A CPI da Funai e do Incra revela mais uma tentativa articulada do agronegócio, por meio da bancada ruralista, de estabelecer novos marcos a essas políticas públicas, e, por isso, colocou-se a antropologia no debate.

**Palavras-chave:** Comissão Parlamentar de Inquérito; Antropologia; Estado; Etnografia de documentos; bancada ruralista.

# FUNAI and INCRA PCI reflections on Anthropology and agribusiness<sup>1</sup>

Julia Marques Dalla Costa

## Agribusiness interest in anthropology

The Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (PCI) to investigate the formerly named Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI)<sup>2</sup> [National Indian Foundation] and the Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (INCRA) [National Institute of Colonisation and Agrarian Reform] in their attributions of the demarcation of Indigenous lands and *Quilombola*<sup>3</sup> territories, respectively, took place between 2015 and 2017, in the Câmara dos Deputados [House of Representatives]. Since this research deals with state practices and actors operating inside the Brazilian Congress, an ethnography of documents was used. Documentary ethnography has special relevance for situations in which the researcher's continuous presence is not facilitated or even possible, in which the interaction with the interlocutors does not provide insights, considering the formality and lack of empathy with these groups, as is often the case when working with political elites. These 'ethnographic barriers', as Teixeira *et al.* (2020) calls them, require the researcher to seek methodological alternatives.

In the case of the PCI, the focus was on events that took place in the public sphere, because in the world of politics, manifestations of power take place at the public level, in the clash between political forces. This does not mean that no negotiations occur or that political arrangements are not signed in restricted environments, inaccessible to public observation, rather that public action in a democratic regime provides central elements of analysis (Teixeira *et al.* 2020). It is understood, therefore, that the documents and public declarations of congresspersons in and around the FUNAI-INCRA PCI contain the speeches of the parties in dispute, demonstrating that the manifestation of power, the debate and the political clashes, must also take place in this arena, inside Congress, in a public space.

Thus, the preparation of records in the PCI is closely linked to the configuration of the meetings and the practices conducted in their midst. The production of documents generated extensive material that aligns and corroborates with the worldview of a specific group: the Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária (FPA) [Agribusiness Parliamentary Front]. In this sense, the research that resulted from this work (Dalla Costa, 2019), and which this article elaborates on, sought to understand how the FUNAI-INCRA PCI constituted a planned political fact to materialise and legitimise, through state documentary production, the interests of a political and economic group (agribusiness) concerning land redistribution policies, including land regularisation for *Quilombos* and Indigenous peoples and agrarian reform settlements.

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1 This text was elaborated based on my Master's dissertation (Dalla Costa, 2019), in which, through an ethnography of documents, I analysed the FUNAI-INCRA PCI.

2 The former name is used here because all the documents pertaining to this study existed prior to a very recent change in name. On Jan. 1, 2023, one of the initial acts of the newly sworn in Lula government was to rename the FUNAI, now known as the Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas [National Indigenous Peoples Foundation], which together with the new Ministry for Indigenous Peoples, seeks to rectify the wrongful and frequently pejorative naming of Brazilian Indigenous people as 'índios' [Indians] and move towards a new era in the government's relationships with the First Peoples of Brazil, one no longer regulated by military tutelage.

3 Ethnic-racial groups considered remnants of communities of *quilombos*, who have their own historical trajectory, endowed with specific territorial relations based on a presumption of Black ancestry related to the historical oppressions they have suffered. *Quilombos* are organised as spaces of resistance and the construction of freedom and Black autonomy, occupying land to achieve a dignified life for their communities, through the reproduction of their ways of life and their own customs.

The FUNAI-INCRA PCI is a prominent event for us to discuss the relationship between anthropology and agribusiness<sup>4</sup>. In truth, this debate did not originate in the FUNAI-INCRA PCI<sup>5</sup>. There have been numerous points of tension over the years<sup>6</sup>, but there was a marked change in the way the anthropological issue was addressed by agribusiness actors at this time.

Brazilian anthropology developed from a perspective of nation-building, understood as the development of national awareness, the participation of and an ethical commitment to the populations studied (Peirano, 1981). The discipline prospered in Brazil through deep relationships with historical, political and social contexts, such that it is associated with a commitment to defending the rights of the groups studied. This association is achieved through research and ethnographies that acknowledge the political and social contexts in which their interlocutors find themselves (Ramos, 1990). In this sense, anthropological work reveals the intricacies of logics and actions, often of domination, that encompass the groups studied, which, as seen in the case of the FUNAI-INCRA PCI, places the anthropologist in a central position to confront actors of power (Silva, 2015).

In the processes of the demarcation of Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands, anthropology is the area of knowledge that focused on the histories, the founding cosmologies of the groups, the forms of appropriation and expropriation of land, retrieving for the literate world a collection of situations that were outside its purview (Leite, 2000). Through anthropologists, the points of view of these communities were and continue to be favoured, transforming oral traditions into documents that are also considered and presented as state documents (land demarcation reports). The demarcation of Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands is accomplished by FUNAI and INCRA, respectively, and both processes begin with the preparation of a technical report – a *Relatório Circunstanciado de Identificação e Delimitação* (RCID) [Detailed Report on Identification and Delimitation] for Indigenous lands, and a *Relatório Técnico de Identificação e Delimitação* (RTID) [Technical Report on Identification and Delimitation] for *Quilombola* territories – the centrepiece of which is the anthropological report<sup>7</sup>.

Despite the participation of several professionals and actors in the extensive and complex processes of *Quilombola* and Indigenous land demarcation, the FUNAI-INCRA PCI settled a recurring accusation: suspicion of the work of anthropologists. Silva (2015:158) emphasises that ‘suspicion, as a possibility, is something applicable to any expert professional; the fact that it falls on anthropologists in an *a priori* manner is the result of ignorance of our premises and methods, but perhaps also of something more serious: of their prior and ill-founded disqualification.’

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4 A Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (PCI) is a legislative instrument provided for in the Brazilian Constitution to fulfil one of the constitutional attributions of the National Congress, to investigate and supervise public administration. Any congressperson can propose a PCI, but to gain approval, the support of one third of the members of the respective house is required to verify a particular issue. The specificities of a PCI are established by its temporality, since it has a deadline to determine its conclusions (it is temporary), and in its investigative character, ‘that of judicial authorities’. With this prerogative, the committee can hold public hearings, summon any authority or citizen to provide clarification, including state authorities, receive petitions from the community in general, assess and issue an opinion on government programmes. In addition, these committees can travel to any place in the national territory to conduct investigations and public hearings and stipulate a deadline for complying with any measure or carrying out due diligence. This action of legislative control enables the referral of its results for investigation and accountability through the competent authorities (the Public Prosecutor’s Office and the federal police). The provision for a PCI in the Federal Constitution is outlined in article 49, item X; article 71, item IV; in paragraph 3 of article 58, in Section VII – The commissions of Chapter I – Legislative power, where the general lines for their creation and objectives are established.

5 Although they were formally constituted as two distinct committees of inquiry, FUNAI-INCRA PCI 1 and FUNAI-INCRA PCI 2, here I consider them as a single inquiry, since the second only concluded the works that were conducted within the scope of the first, thus it is impossible to dissociate them in terms of analysis.

6 To name a few: PCI on FUNAI’s activities in 1999 <<https://www2.camara.leg.br/atividade-legislativa/comissoes/comissoes-temporarias/parlamentar-de-inquerito/51-legislatura/cpifunai>>; PCI on NGOs in 2001 <<http://www2.senado.leg.br/bdsf/handle/id/194594>>; *Projeto de Emenda Constitucional* (PEC) [Draft Constitutional Amendment] no. 215/2000 <<https://www.camara.leg.br/propostas-legislativas/14562>>; among others.

7 The process of Indigenous land demarcation is regulated by Decree 1775/1996 and Ordinance MJ 14/1999 and establishes the rules for the elaboration of the *Relatório Circunstanciado de Identificação e Delimitação* (RCID). In turn, the emission of titles for *Quilombola* territories is regulated by Decree 4.887/2003 and the rules for the preparation of the *Relatório Técnico de Identificação e Delimitação* (RTID) are set out in INCRA Normative Instruction 57/2009.

Even on other occasions when the group that represents agribusiness in the legislative branch, popularly known as the *Ruralista* caucus, has presented criticisms of the work of anthropologists, this has never been the main point of the debate. In 1999, for example, when the PCI on FUNAI's activities was completed, the report highlighted the arbitrariness of the Indigenous body in the process of demarcating Indigenous areas. The principal difference is that the 1999 PCI report criticises the administrative process as a whole, FUNAI's administrative attributes as the body responsible for the demarcation of Indigenous lands, and the influence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on the institution. In contrast, the FUNAI-INCRA PCI directs this criticism towards the work of anthropologists specifically, claiming that demarcation 'is based on a simple technical, unilateral, ideological and arbitrary report' and that this work is conducted based on 'the abusive actions of the FUNAI, NGOs and the anthropology departments of universities, all supported by the *Ministério Público Federal* [Federal Public Prosecutor's Office]' (Brasil, 2015: 04)<sup>8</sup>.

Therefore, the FUNAI-INCRA PCI demonstrated from the outset that anthropology was one of the focuses of its activities<sup>9</sup>. Since its inception, investigating this field of knowledge and its professionals pervaded the PCI. In the justification that supports the request for the PCI, the *Ruralista* representatives, who recognise the constitutional prerogatives for regularising Indigenous and *Quilombola* areas (art. 231 and art. 68 of the ADCT), argue that there is a distortion in the conduct of the administrative processes established for these purposes at INCRA and FUNAI, they are too subjective and biased, since 'the mere opinion of an anthropologist supersedes everything and everyone' (Brasil, 2015: 03). Thus, according to the requesting representatives, there is an 'anthropological problem' in these institutions that needs to be combated. As a strategy to delegitimise the demarcation of traditional lands, led by INCRA and FUNAI, representatives began directly attacking anthropology, claiming that there is no technical or scientific rigor to obtaining anthropological reports.

In this wake, it becomes evident why the approval of the FUNAI-INCRA PCI by the directorate of the lower house took place the day after the final report on *Proposta de Emenda à Constituição* (PEC) [draft amendment to the Constitution] no. 215 was approved<sup>10</sup>. In general terms, PEC no. 215 proposes a transfer of competence for approving the demarcations of Indigenous lands and the ratification of previously homologated demarcations exclusively to Congress. The objective of this series of coordinated actions in Congress, particularly by the *Ruralista* caucus, was the prioritisation of the agrarian agenda that is central to this group. To this end, the legitimisation of such a fact pervaded the investigation of the institutions entrusted with the task (INCRA and FUNAI), since according to the *Ruralista* discourse, they were riddled with illegalities in the conduct of this legal attribution, which the representatives aimed to investigate and disseminate within the scope of the PCI.

In this investigative spirit, the opening of the parliamentary inquiry alerted the public servants concerning the institutions that were to be investigated, including the anthropologists who worked at INCRA and FUNAI, and anthropologists outside these institutions who had directly or indirectly collaborated in the processes of Indigenous and *Quilombola* demarcations, together with the entire field of anthropology.

8 In October 2010, the final report of the PCI on NGOs, carried out by the *Senado*, was presented. It focused on the debate concerning the activities of these institutions and the amounts they received to act in Indigenous areas focusing on health, together with their presence in the Amazon, especially due to the absence of the state. The PCI on NGOs is part of a set of actions that seem to seek to undermine the participation of organised civil society in public policies aimed at sociological minorities. However, since it does not deal with land demarcation or refer to anthropology, this PCI was not included as a source of analysis and comparison.

9 The Request for PCI no. 16/2015 makes 27 references to anthropology in its 16 pages, while the Request for PCI no. 26/2016, has 85 such references in its 116 pages. In these documents, these references include the terms anthropology, anthropological, anthropologist and anthropologists.

10 PEC no. 215, presented for the first time in 2000, 'adds item XVIII to art. 49; modifies §4 and adds §8 both in art. 231, of the Federal Constitution', i.e., exclusive competence in approving the demarcation of Indigenous lands and the ratification of previously homologated demarcations passes to the National Congress. Furthermore, it indicates that the demarcation criteria and procedures must be regulated by law; they are currently regulated by Decree no. 1.775/1996.

The approval and creation of a PCI is made in the form of a formal written request, in which the justifications for the investigation are presented. The content of the Request for PCI no. 16/2015, which demanded an investigation into the INCRA and FUNAI, a small text of 16 pages, fulfilled the minimum requirement. In this document, the signatory representatives did not skimp on adjectives to expose their considerations on anthropological practice.

In order to accomplish their intentions, anthropologists do not have any ethical or legal limits, or even respect for people illicitly affected by their reckless, fraudulent and tyrannical actions. (Brasil, 2015: 08)

The main alleged reasons for the creation of the FUNAI-INCRA PCI were the invalidity of the demarcation processes, anchored in ‘fraudulent anthropological reports’. Thus, the role of anthropologists working for the state was under suspicion, particularly those working for INCRA, FUNAI and the Federal Public Prosecutor’s Office, but also those in civil society organisations, universities and the Associação Brasileira de Antropologia (ABA) [Brazilian Association of Anthropology].

The scope of the FUNAI-INCRA PCI must be seen in a broader political context. The debates and arguments that were repeated throughout commission hearings form part of a political discussion that intensified with the impeachment of the President of the Republic, Dilma Rousseff<sup>11</sup>, in 2016, and culminated in the election of Jair Bolsonaro to the office of president in October 2018. Arguments concerning anthropological practice, the general contribution of social and human sciences to national development, which were presented at the PCI, reached new heights during the government elected from 2019 to 2022.

Notably, we observe that the recognition of the coexistence of different peoples in the same nation, confirmed above all by articles 215, 216, 231 and 68 of the Ato das Disposições Constitucionais Transitórias (ADCT) [Transitory Constitutional Provisions Act] of the Federal Constitution of 1988, would be subject to severe attacks in this new context. The Federal Constitution represented a break with the preceding Brazilian constitutional system, ‘since it recognises the Brazilian state as pluri-ethnic, and no longer based on intended homogeneities’ guiding the actions of social actors, especially public agents and politicians (Pereira, 2002: 01).

Achievements by Indigenous and *Quilombola* social movements regarding the recognition of their territorial rights, especially in the years following the country’s re-democratisation, have faced serious setbacks that include the PCI examined here. The perspective that was taking shape – and that we have seen implemented – was meant to bring about abrupt changes in the inspiring legal principles of the rule of law that the 1988 Constitution inaugurated. Among the various events taking place at that moment in national history, the PCI is relevant in exposing the activities of an important group in the political and economic scenario, the so-called *Ruralista* caucus, and its agenda to maintain control over Brazil’s agrarian structure.

### **A brief history of the *Ruralista* caucus**

Considering the implications and developments of the FUNAI-INCRA PCI, I understand that its analysis and dissemination of the debate on its effects is of ‘democratic relevance’, to use the terms of Nader (1972). For this, it is necessary to situate the PCI as a study on an elite group: politicians democratically elected to the national legislature, federal representatives that compose the *Câmara dos Deputados* (lower house). The position of congressperson itself can be considered an elite position, where the term *elite* means a group of power, one which occupies influential and important positions in social life, whose decisions shape what happens in society in general, and whose interests are hegemonic (Shore, 2004).

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<sup>11</sup> For more information on President Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment process, see Teixeira, Cruvinel, and Fernandes (2020).

Another inherent characteristic of the Brazilian political elite is that it is a family niche (Oliveira et al., 2018). The rationalisation, bureaucratisation and modernisation of the political field were unable to subdue the presence of families dominating politics in the most varied spheres of power, in the apparatus of state administration or in the presence and the direction of actions and trends of state political parties. Oliveira *et al.* (2018) draw attention to the process of metamorphosis that dominant groups, organised as families and kinship networks, have attained over time. After all, they were able to remain in power amid the processes of change in Brazilian society and improvements in its numerous institutions. It was no different in the FUNAI-INCRA PCI, where representatives who form part of certain traditional political families were readily identified<sup>12</sup>.

The FUNAI-INCRA PCI was a privileged space for the Ruralista caucus, the popular name for the group of representatives who are linked to the FPA, itself a fairly mixed association of members of various parties in both the Senado and the Câmara dos Deputados. The FPA currently has 280 signatories (241 federal representatives and 39 senators), which in relative terms represents almost half of the Senado (48%) and the Câmara dos Deputados (47%)<sup>13</sup>. Thus, the dominant political elite in the PCI was the agrarian elite.

The agrarian elite is one of the most long-established groups of the Brazilian elite. It is old, traditional, and does not merely form part of national politics, it shapes it. This group has its origins in colonisation and influenced the agrarian organisation of the country. It is not possible to discuss agricultural or land policy without a historical perspective of the formation of rural property in Brazil. The formation of the agrarian network, based on land grabbing and subsequent privatisation of land, reached its peak under the so-called Lei de Terras [Land Law] of 1850 (Law no. 601), issued two weeks after Law no. 581, which ended the slave trade. From the onset, the Brazilian colonisation process engendered the concentration of land by national economic elites. The Land Law of 1850 facilitated access to land for those who had the capital to acquire it, leaving a large part of rural workers, including Indigenous and traditional peoples, outside the system. Land concentration is a consequence of the Brazilian historical and economic process, based on slave labour (Alcântara Filho & Fontes, 2009; Leite, 2018).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, attempts to deconcentrate land were timid, supported by popular movements that began to organise themselves as a result of the struggle for land, but these were suppressed by the 1964 coup d'état. However, even the establishment of the military dictatorship did not mean the end of social movements, many emerged and gained strength during this period. The slow but progressive transition from the existing military dictatorship towards democracy mobilised civil society in defence of social and labour agendas, promoting an increase in progressive members of Congress (Kinzo, 2001). The struggles of Indigenous peoples and traditional communities, such as the *Quilombolas*, formed part of the democratisation process in Brazil.

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12 As the sub-rapporteur of the INCRA commission, Tereza Cristina (then a member of the PSB/MS) is the great-granddaughter of Pedro Celestino Corrêa da Costa and the granddaughter of Fernando Corrêa da Costa, both of whom are former governors of Mato Grosso (before it was divided into two states) as members of the *União Democrática Nacional* (UDN) [National Democratic Union]. The 2<sup>nd</sup> vice-chairman of the Commission Directorate, representative Mandetta (DEM/MS), is the nephew of former representative Nelson Trad (MDB/MS) and cousin of the former mayor of Campo Grande, Nelsinho Trad (MDB/MS), who unsuccessfully ran for state governor in 2014. He is also the cousin of Fabio Trad, federal representative for the PSD/MS, and Marquinho Trad, former state representative for the MDB/MS and current mayor of Campo Grande for the PSD/MS. Among the PCI opposition members, it is worth mentioning federal representative Nilto Tatto (PT/SP), whose four brothers held positions as federal and state representatives and municipal councillors. The then federal representative Janete Capiberibe (PSB/AP), wife of João Capiberibe (PSB/AP), has held the positions of Mayor of Macapá, state senator and state governor. In the 2018 elections, the couple's son, Camilo Capiberibe (PSB/AP), was elected as a federal representative.

13 According to its statute (art. 1), the FPA is an associative entity that 'defends common interests, constituted by representatives of all currents of political opinion in the National Congress and aims to stimulate the expansion of public policies for the development of national agribusiness.' <<https://fpagro-pecuaria.org.br/estatuto/>>

Beginning in the 1980s, Brazil underwent a broad process of re-democratisation that enabled the inclusion of issues on the state agenda, which until that time were barely visible, generating innovative public policies. Demands for land redistribution and recognition of the ethnic groups that formed Brazilian society gained greater relevance from that decade onwards. The 1988 Constitution confirmed the existence of a pluri-ethnic state in Brazil, recognising and ensuring ethnic differences (Silva, 1994).

Despite this re-democratisation movement and the recognition of rights, the agrarian and rural elite showed concerns with the initiatives that were in progress, such as the foundation of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) [Landless Rural Workers Movement], the creation of the Ministério da Reforma e do Desenvolvimento Agrário [Ministry for Agrarian Reform and Development] and the Plano Nacional de Reforma Agrária [National Plan for Agrarian Reform] (Pompeia, 2018). However, as Pompeia points out, the agrarian sector was fragmented, with its numerous actors experiencing a crisis of representation, different priorities and struggling with the country's fiscal crisis.

In this scenario, the political organisation of the Ruralista caucus began during the period of the Assembleia Nacional Constituinte<sup>14</sup>, when congresspersons from different groups in the agricultural sector began a conformation in defence of the interests of this field. It was initially named the Frente Ampla da Agropecuária Brasileira (FAAB) [Broad Front for Brazilian Agribusiness], and its composition presented a diversity of organisations and interests, including the União Democrática Ruralista (UDR) [Rural Democratic Union], the Sociedade Rural Brasileira (SRB) [Brazilian Rural Society] and the Organização das Cooperativas Brasileiras (OCB) [Organisation of Brazilian Co-operatives]. These entities, which had been the protagonists in disputes with each other in previous periods, formed the FAAB to oppose the growing demand for land redistribution through agrarian reform (Pompeia, 2018).

For these groups, represented by the FAAB in the Assembleia Constituinte (1987), the land issue was much more relevant than the agricultural issue<sup>15</sup>. Thus, the main agenda on which the FAAB sought to act was preventing large scale land redistribution, an objective of agrarian reform defended by entities like the Associação Brasileira de Reforma Agrária (ABRA) [Brazilian Association of Agrarian Reform], the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT) [Pastoral Land Commission], and others. According to Pompeia, the FAAB's role in the Assembleia Constituinte achieved an 'innovative result' by bringing together representative associations in agriculture and livestock production, such as the Confederação da Agricultura e Pecuária do Brasil (CNA) [Agriculture and Livestock Confederation of Brazil], the aforementioned OCB, SRB and UDR, and industrial and service sectors. After the enactment of the 1988 Constitution, the Ruralista caucus continued to exist informally between 1990 and 1994. The FAAB was reorganised in 1995; in 2002 it became the Frente Parlamentar de Apoio à Agropecuária [Parliamentary Front for the Support of Agribusiness], and in 2008 was renamed the Frente Parlamentar da Agropecuária (FPA) [Agribusiness Parliamentary Front]. Regarding the organisation of the FPA in 2015, the year of the FUNAI-INCRA PCI, and given the centrality of the theme for the group, the main political actors of the Ruralista caucus ran the commission. The entire Directorate of the PCI (all seven positions) was occupied by members of the Ruralista caucus.

<sup>14</sup> The initial government body was convened by then President José Sarney, in 1985. Working for 20 months, and involving 559 congresspersons (72 senators and 487 federal representatives) and direct participation by Brazilian society, the *Assembleia Nacional Constituinte* was vested with the power to draft what eventually became the Constitution of 1988, enacted on October 5 the same year.

<sup>15</sup> For a deeper analysis of this issue see Pompeia (2018), which involves a comparative perspective of a similar process in the USA.



Much like the period of the Assembleia Nacional Constituinte, these facts reveal the agenda of the Ruralista caucus, which while it includes other policies<sup>16</sup>, continues to be centred on the agrarian issue. Even though the articulation of the FAAB had managed to curb the establishment of broad agrarian democratisation during the Assembleia Constituinte, in subsequent years, public policies of access to land, notably agrarian reform and Indigenous and *Quilombola* land rights, were established through technical procedures, staff, and concrete results. Even considering that the demands are much higher than the execution capacity of the INCRA and FUNAI, these public policies are not aligned with the interests of the conforming agribusiness groups.

One of the factors that provided the growth and broad articulation of this group, and of parties mostly aligned with the right-wing in the National Congress, were the successive defeats in presidential elections between 2003 and 2014 (four victories for the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) [Workers' Party]: Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva between 2003-2010 and Dilma Rousseff between 2011-2016). During the PT's period in government, agendas enabling social participation were widely disseminated, despite the fact that, from the perspective of numerous actors, certain issues dear to social movements more aligned with the left have not been translated into public policies and effective state practices.

In this scenario, there were several impasses between organised civil society and the government, especially related to environmental, labour and land redistribution issues (agrarian reform, demarcation of Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands). While the agribusiness entities strengthened actions in the Legislative branch, with the growing demand for arable land, they questioned the demarcation of *Quilombola* territories, Indigenous lands and expropriation for the creation of agrarian reform settlements, sealing the partnership between sectors of industry, agribusiness and congress (Pompeia, 2018).

According to research conducted by Pompeia, mobilisation for changes in the Forest Code was a determining factor for bringing these actors together. From the debates around this agenda, relationships between the various companies in the agribusiness segment became more systematic and institutionalised through the FPA. Amendments to the Forest Code, in 2012, weakened legal provisions for environmental protection, overcoming protests from civil society organisations, such as rural workers and traditional peoples and communities, and scientists, Sociedade Brasileira para o Progresso da Ciência (SBPC) [Brazilian Society for Scientific Progress] and the Academia Brasileira de Ciências (ABC) [Brazilian Academy of Sciences].

Therefore, the FPA began to play a central role in the political articulations of the agribusiness sector. Thus, it is not surprising that the Ruralista caucus won the vast majority of seats and the entirety of the Commission's Directorate in the FUNAI-INCRA PCI. It did so in compliance with the principle that the representation of political parties and congressional blocs in the legislature must be proportionally reproduced, as far as possible, in the composition of the Directorate and the Commissions, demonstrating the influence and power of the group within parties, and the importance of this agenda to specific parties<sup>17</sup>. The two Commissions (FUNAI-INCRA PCI 1 and 2) consisted of 66 representatives (48 in the first and 49 in the second), and of these, 31 participated in both Commissions and 42 were linked to the FPA<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> These policies include desired changes in the Forestry Code, such as Bill no. 2.362/2019, which proposes the extinction of the obligation for rural properties to maintain an area of native forest, the so-called Legal Reserve, and the growing number of pesticides approved for use in the country. In 2020, 493 new types were approved, 4% more than in 2019, also a record year, and following three successive years of record numbers of approved pesticides. <https://g1.globo.com/economia/agronegocios/noticia/2021/01/14/numero-de-agrotoxicos-registrados-em-2020-e-o-mais-alto-da-serie-historica-maioria-e-produ-to-generico.ghtml>.

<sup>17</sup> Provisions contained in the Federal Constitution, art. 58, §1º; Internal Regulations of the National Congress, art. 10; Internal Rules of the *Câmara dos Deputados*, art. 8, 21, §1, 25, §1 and 29, §2; Internal Rules of the *Senado*, art. 59.

<sup>18</sup> The pages of the two committees can be accessed on the website of the *Câmara dos Deputados*: <https://www2.camara.leg.br/atividade-legislativa/comissoes/comissoes-temporarias/parlamentar-de-inquerito/55a-legislatura/cpi-funai-e-incra>; <https://www2.camara.leg.br/atividade-legislativa/comissoes/comissoes-temporarias/parlamentar-de-inquerito/55a-legislatura/cpi-funai-e-incra-2>.

## Anthropological work as a fragile link in the chain of the demarcation process

As previously mentioned, the entire Directorate of the FUNAI-INCRA PCI was composed of members of the Ruralista caucus: Alceu Moreira (MDB/RS), chairman; Luis Carlos Heinze (PP/RS), 1<sup>st</sup> vice-chairman; Luiz Henrique Mandetta (DEM/MS), 2<sup>nd</sup> vice-chairman; Nelson Marquezelli (PTB/SP), 3<sup>rd</sup> vice-chairman; Nilson Leitão (PSDB/MT), rapporteur; Tereza Cristina (then PSB/MS, now DEM/MS), sub-rapporteur; Valdir Colatto (MDB/SC), sub-rapporteur. The effects of this comprehensive representation by the FPA were quickly visible in how the PCI operated, including but not limited to: decisions on the agenda of the Commission's meetings were taken by the chair; the preparation of the report was the sole responsibility of the rapporteur (incorporating suggestions from other representatives also occurred at his discretion); definitions concerning trips for due diligence (place, date, participating team) were taken by the Commission's Directorate; invitations for external actors to act as consultants and collaborators in the PCI were granted by the chair. Such attributions, typical of the chair of the PCI, provided for in the Internal Regulations of the Câmara dos Deputados, demonstrate the importance of ensuring these central positions by the Ruralista caucus. What was evident is how discussion agendas by non-FPA representatives, presented throughout the PCI, were not even considered.

Regarding its investigative objective, a PCI requires the collection and investigation of information concerning the 'specific fact' approved as the purpose of the work. Thus, its activities consisted of meetings that included internal, deliberative, public hearings for taking testimonies, and external due diligence (outside Brasília, DF). The PCI members presented requests as a way of participating and trying to influence the discussions<sup>19</sup>. In the first sessions of the PCI, a kind of tacit agreement was established among the representatives for all the requests presented to be approved. As explained by some representatives, this was to ensure counterpoints to the perspectives of the debate and broad participation. Thus, the approval of requests of different natures practically became protocol, and it was quite common for them to be carried out in blocks to speed up the process. Based on this recourse, what is evident was how disputes did not take place over the approval of requests, but over the selection of which of those approved would be acted on.

It is important to emphasise that the 14 representatives who opposed the creation of the PCI and the work carried out by its chair were essentially representatives who identify as centre-left and left<sup>20</sup>. While the FUNAI-INCRA PCI was in progress, these representatives from different parties and with distinct agendas formed an opposition<sup>21</sup>. Unlike the *Ruralista* caucus, which has an agenda that can be defined, together with a congressional front that unites them, the opposition representatives formed a temporary articulation in relation to the conflict established in the PCI, as a block of 'resistance' to this attack.

As presented, the dynamics of the PCI meant it was possible to identify the sides in dispute, the Ruralista caucus that supported the commission and the opposition group. As is characteristic of legislative activity, policy is carried out through debates, compositions and agreements. Even in an environment with clear dispute, such as the FUNAI-INCRA PCI, it is possible to perceive certain moments in which the opposition and Ruralista benches sought some kind of understanding for certain themes. Despite these, there were no changes in the way the chair of the commission worked.

<sup>19</sup> In total, 394 requests were presented at the FUNAI-INCRA CPI, 296 in the first (2015-2016) and 98 in the second (2016-2017).

<sup>20</sup> Federal representatives who were members of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), the Partido Socialismo e Liberdade (PSOL) [Socialism and Freedom Party], the Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB) [Brazilian Socialist Party], the Partido Comunista do Brasil (PCdoB) [Communist Party of Brazil], and the Partido Popular Socialista (PPS) [Popular Socialist Party], currently named Cidadania [Citizenship].

<sup>21</sup> As highlighted earlier in the text, considering both commissions (66 representatives), 42 were members of the FPA and 14 were from parties in opposition to the PCI. Thus, 10 representatives were not part of the *Ruralista* caucus; however, they made no form of alliance with the opposition.

The choice of activities that were carried out based on the approved requests, such as which deponent was prioritised and when, was arbitrary and unilateral, transferring the friction between the representatives from the approval of requests to the definition of the agenda of the meetings, since the conflicting positions in the commission were not respected. The PCI's agenda was defined by the chair, thus the strategy of facilitating the approval of the requests eased the pressure on the discussions regarding the pertinence of each of them, and above all enabled the chair and his colleagues on the Directorate the freedom to define the agenda. The chair of the PCI had space to establish its timetable and work pace, counting on the support of the federal representatives in the Ruralista caucus to echo any of the bloc's demands. This organisation of the work is of paramount importance for understanding the outcome of the FUNAI-INCRA PCI.

The majority of the meetings that involved the broad participation of representatives were those in which both invited and summoned deponents were present. The definition of invitations or summons was established in the requests presented and approved by the PCI, at the discretion of the member who prepared them. The main difference is that an invitation (or request) can be refused without sanctions, whereas with a summons (or subpoena), attendance is mandatory and punishment can occur in cases of non-compliance.

In the initial sessions of the PCI, when the procedures for its operation were established, there was intense debate with regard to the pertinence of the principal of a summons and when it should be activated. Several representatives, particularly those who were against the PCI's objectives, advocated for the use of invitations in all requests. For them, a summons should only be used when the person invited refused to participate. However, in organising the work of the PCI, the Directorate reinforced the importance of a summons to achieve the proposed investigation objectives on several occasions.

Despite efforts to reach an agreement between the parties, in order to transform the summonses into invitations, this procedure was unsuccessful among the agribusiness representatives. Everything indicates that the interest of the Ruralista representatives in using the mechanism of a summons, especially among members of the Directorate (chair and rapporteurs), was to ensure the presence of the actors that they considered essential, but above all, actors they considered to be resistant to the PCI, who could potentially refuse to appear, and those for whom the constraining effect of this mechanism indicated the relationship of forces to which they would be subject in the PCI.

As noted, the polarisation seen in the PCI reflected the interests in dispute around the issue of land. The themes dear to the Ruralista caucus, as previously announced in the requests for the creation of the PCI, made direct reference to the demarcation of Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands, as well as the responsibility of anthropologists in 'false' demarcations.

The regularisation of Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands, and agrarian reform, raise a factor important to the Ruralista caucus: they are public policies for land redistribution, which are contrary to the interests of this agribusiness alliance, but not to them alone. Land regularisation for traditional peoples and communities consists of a public policy that combines the dimensions of recognition and social redistribution. Demands for recognition are those that call for official acceptance of group differences and specificities, while demands for redistribution refer to better material conditions of reproduction. The allocation of land to traditional peoples and communities addresses this ambivalent demand for recognition of their specific history within Brazilian history and, at the same time, culminates in the delivery of traditionally occupied territory, guaranteeing formal access to land and permanence in areas sufficient for their physical and cultural reproduction, a basic condition for development and social inclusion (Fraser, 1995).

Thus, when resuming the requests presented in the PCI, it becomes apparent which themes focused on the representatives' political interests and for which actors coercion was considered necessary to ensure attendance. I observed that summonses were reserved for authors of anthropological reports on Indigenous and *Quilombola*

land regularisation processes, leaders of social movements, and members of NGOs linked to the defence of Indigenous and *Quilombola* rights. According to members of the *Ruralista* caucus in the PCI, these were the actors for whom a summons was necessary to ensure their presence and testimony<sup>22</sup>.

As I highlighted earlier, it is the responsibility of the chair of the PCI to define the agendas and organise the meetings. Based on the participants selected for these hearings, it was clear what the tone of the meeting would be. The majority of the testimonies recorded came from requests by members of the *Ruralista* caucus and, given this situation of control, the ease with which the chair conducted the meetings was visible. Invitations and summonses caused different interactions between members of the PCI<sup>23</sup>.

Of the 26 testimonies given during the 20 hearings, only three were from women and all those present were due to requests from members of the *Ruralista* caucus. In the sessions in which women were present as deponents, different treatment was observed, particularly regarding the anthropologists Flávia de Mello and Daisy Barcellos. As I have already highlighted, summonses were an instrument used by *Ruralista* representatives to ensure the presence of certain deponents and debate during the hearings. Both anthropologists were summoned, that is, they were seen as averse or resistant to the ideas of their summoners.

In another work, I focused on the PCI meetings in which the anthropologists were present in the role of invited and summoned deponents (Dalla Costa, 2019). Here, I briefly allude to some of these discussions. In almost all the meetings, there was at least some mention of anthropological practice. However, anthropologists were present to testify in the PCI on only four occasions, and on two of these, they were there to discuss the elaboration of specific works (identification and delimitation reports concerning Indigenous land and *Quilombola* territory). On these occasions, there were constant accusations by *Ruralista* representatives and their guests that the INCRA and FUNAI staff, together with the anthropologists/authors of the reports, presented clearly ideological and unethical conduct that focused on serving 'their own interests', rather than being guided by the rules and techniques that govern their activities. From this perspective, these professionals aimed to favour people or groups who had no rights on this issue, with the clear intention of harming those who are truly deserving of public policies, in addition to rural producers who would unfairly lose their properties.

One of the cases which representatives focused on intently is that of the Mato Preto Indigenous Land identified in the municipalities of Erechim, Erebango and Getúlio Vargas, in the State of Rio Grande do Sul, which threatened to dispossess around 300 non-Indigenous families who owned small rural properties. The document establishing the PCI, Request no. 16/2015, is emphatic in stating that the report prepared by the anthropologist Flávia de Mello 'is a fraud', 'During the work, it was proven that the anthropologist falsified information', 'Her performance as an anthropologist was completely unethical' (Brasil, 2015: 6-7). Among the accusations levelled at anthropologist Flávia de Mello was how her knowledge of the Guarani ethnic group, whose study she coordinated at FUNAI, made her unfit for the task, because she was too close to the 'object of study' and, therefore, impartial in the realisation of this task.

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22 When an invited or summoned deponent is participating, the PCI meeting is called a public hearing, since it consists of a space for debate. The public hearings of the FUNAI-INCRA PCI began with a 20-minute oral presentation by the invited or summoned deponent, followed by up to 30 minutes of questioning by the commission's rapporteur and replies. After this stage, the representative who requested the presence of the invited or summoned deponent was permitted five minutes of questioning, while others who had signed up during the oral presentation of the invited or summoned deponent were called individually to question them or offer some consideration, and used up to three minutes for their questions. At the end, the invited or summoned deponent was allowed to discuss their final considerations for up to ten minutes. The chair of the commission, in their commanding role, can speak at any time, using as much time as they choose. It is important to note that these are the norms established for the conduct of the commission. However, in some cases these times were not fully respected, depending on the deponent and the topic being addressed.

23 Of the 26 testimonies given, one was spontaneous (with no preliminary request), seven were based on summons or subpoenas and 18 were invitations or requests. Of the 25 statements made due to requests, 22 came from members of the *Ruralista* caucus and three from opposition representatives. What I perceived based on this is that the debate was set up according to the point of view of a political group with no regard to the right to defence, as had been stated by the chair of the PCI during the first meeting.

In her participation in the PCI, Flávia de Mello explained in detail the misrepresentation made by the request for the PCI. Indeed, opposition representatives and many of those present showed embarrassment at the fragility of the request for the PCI, confirming the weakness of the investigation of the facts by the requesting representatives and, by extension, the commission's object of investigation. This situation can be summarised in the manifestation of federal representative Erika Kokay (PT/DF) at a meeting on December 1, 2015, recorded in shorthand notes:

It seems to me, therefore, that in today's hearing, the explanations of the deponent demonstrate and expose how the purpose of the PCI is to criminalise even professionals, a profound disrespect of professionals and anthropologists in this country. I keep asking myself: if there had not been a report attesting to the Indigenous presence in this region, if there had not been occupation by settlers or farmers, would this act of questioning the report have taken place?

The report exists because representatives created, appended and copied part of a [civil] action. Look at what was read and spoken here by the chair of this PCI! What was read here as an argument for establishing this PCI was taken from a petition, it was taken from a [civil] action. Look at what we're discussing here!? Someone took the action of an interested party of settlers who were questioning a report by the FUNAI itself, that is, a report by anthropologist Flávia [de Mello], they copied this document from the action and constructed the elements and arguments for the creation of a PCI that, as I keep saying, has no determined fact—and all this without the anthropologist herself having been heard in this action.

As reported by representative Erika Kokay at the aforementioned hearing, the chairman of the PCI, Alceu Moreira (MDB/RS), had informed that the data presented in the request for the FUNAI-INCRA PCI, which accused not only Flávia de Mello, but the practice of anthropology as a whole, were obtained from a legal process in progress that sought to annul the process of demarcation of the Mato Preto Indigenous Land. Representatives from the *Ruralista* caucus limited themselves to minimising the huge mistakes highlighted by the anthropologist to document nonconformities. Even with the corrections and notes made by the anthropologist, the audience continued as if Flávia de Mello had not said a thing. Contrary to that determined by an argumentative logic, the representatives continued their questioning along the same lines.

Another example presented in the request for the PCI deals with the land regularisation of the Morro Alto Quilombola Territory, located in the municipalities of Osório and Maquiné, also in the State of Rio Grande do Sul. According to the document, the ongoing expropriation by INCRA of 4,564 hectares occupied by family farmers is a demand from the state's Black and *Quilombola* social movement in conjunction with academia. Numerous representatives accused the university of fomenting 'notions of *Quilombo*, *Quilombolas* and ethnicity' in mostly Afro-descendant groups (Brasil, 2015: 13).

In the case of Morro Alto, anthropologist Daisy de Barcellos was summoned, since she was responsible for the identification studies of the *Quilombo*. As occurred in Flávia de Mello's hearing, no one addressed questions with the view to debating the report she had prepared. The questions indicated revolved around the central argument of the PCI, the ideologisation of anthropology as a field of knowledge, and the partiality of professionals thus trained whose actions favoured their interlocutors.

In addition, some deputies understood that it was pertinent not only to discuss the capacity of these women regarding the activities they carried out, but that it was acceptable to present questions of a personal nature. In an attempt to discredit the testimony of anthropologist Flávia de Mello, a representative questioned whether she had a 'love relationship' with one of the Guaranis whose Indigenous land was the subject of her studies. During the testimony of anthropologist Daisy Barcellos, the rapporteur, Nilson Leitão (PSDB/MT), questioned her about her relationship with a member of the local Black movement, one of her interlocutors

in the preparation of the anthropological report. As previously discussed (Dalla Costa, 2019), the treatment given to deponents invited by the *Ruralista* caucus was the opposite, such that they were free to use the time, compose their explanations and expound their conclusions. These hearings were marked by the exchange of compliments between the Directorate and those invited to speak, encouraging them to fully express their opinions.

Based on the material presented in the PCI requests and participation in commission meetings, according to members of the *Ruralista* caucus, it was evident that ongoing collusion had occurred between anthropologists in state and academic positions and NGOs, with the protection of the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office. They claimed that this 'conspiracy' acted with the intent to attack private property and rural producers, that 'the wave of demarcations has had ideological and financial motivations' (Brasil, 2015: 8). The 'denunciations of fraud' in relation to these 'groups with shady interests that take advantage of the good faith of humble people' are classified by these representatives as 'a genuine "industry" to legitimise third party lands' using constitutional demarcation devices as a pretext (Brasil, 2015: 14)<sup>24</sup>.

The participation of the aforementioned anthropologists in the PCI did not change the arguments of the *Ruralista* caucus. In the same manner that the request for the PCI made serious accusations of non-compliance with various laws, codes of ethics and conduct, the *Ruralista* caucus maintained its assertions that the unsatisfactory quality of the reports was the motive behind their questioning the demarcation processes, even after meetings that involved the participation of anthropologists. In this dispute, anthropology assumes the place of an imprecise, subjective, partial field of knowledge, responsible for causing bias in Indigenous and *Quilombola* demarcation processes.

As discussed at the beginning of this text, when we reflect on why anthropology is being attacked in this space of land dispute and redistribution, one factor that cannot be left out of the equation is how the histories of Indigenous peoples and *Quilombolos* have been essentially erased until recently. Brazil's official historiography has long-favoured other points of view. Indigenous peoples and rural Black communities have always been on the margins of formal land registration systems, the result of instruments created by those in power.

The lack of access to legal documentation of their lands, or even the impossibility of registering them in a registry office, adds to social and racial discrimination and the difficulties in overcoming the barrier of bureaucracy in the literate world. The rule for these groups is one of experiencing a profound strangeness in relation to bureaucratic-legal codes, facing difficult barriers to surmount regarding state services and structures. Sometimes official documents are defended as the only sources of reliable information. Written documentary sources are subject to subjectivities in their elaboration, which highlights the fact that their preference is to value an elite social group to the detriment of others, who live on the margins (Almeida, 2011; Paraíso, 1994). Thus, oral history is imperative to prevent persistent errors that exclude Indigenous and *Quilombola* communities from official historiography. In this sense, through oral history, anthropology accesses the collective memory of these groups as a means to bring their histories to the literate, bureaucratic and legal planes.

In the demarcation of Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands, anthropological work is central to the development of other technical works (agronomic, cartographic, administrative) and, as posed earlier, exposes and characterises a historical situation under dispute. By advancing in the recognition of the ethnic territory within the cultural and historical sphere to consolidate the right to restitution, anthropological work as state identification and delimitation reports becomes a potential instrument for changing the agrarian reality.

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24 By virtue of Request for PCI no. 16/2015, INCRA's Coordenação-Geral de Regularização Territórios Quilombolas [General Coordination for Regularization of Quilombola Territories] issued Technical Information no. 43/2015. In it, a table was compiled presenting a comparison of rural units, which lists the percentages of rural establishments in relation to the national territory (41.67%); conservation units (17.15%); Indigenous lands (13.33%); settlement projects (10.37%); and titled *Quilombola* territories (0.12%).

The demand for land from these groups, guaranteed in constitutional precepts and which use anthropological knowledge to ensure their materiality, leads to the exclusion of potentially productive areas from the real estate market, since Indigenous lands become the property of the federal government for the exclusive use of the group, and *Quilombola* territories are private lands that cannot be sold, divided or used as collateral.

Thus, the attack on the work of anthropologists seems to have been the strategy encountered by the *Ruralista* caucus to alter the current process required for the demarcation of Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands. Instead of criticising the process as a whole, like the 1999 FUNAI PCI did, the FUNAI-INCRA PCI sought to construct a vision of and simultaneously attack that which, from its perspective, was a kind of fragile link in the demarcation process: the anthropological report.

Accusations of fraud, lack of ethics, ideological and biased work were thrown around during the PCI to point out that this is not about scientific knowledge, that anthropologists are biased in how they favour Indigenous and traditional peoples. The former president of the ABA, Lia Zanotta Machado, noted that the PCI's accusations were directed at the ethnographic methodology, which demands that the researcher maintains a profound and continuous dialogue with the community in question. The narrative constructed from the PCI ignores that anthropological research is supported by scientific evidence, extensive research, and that ethnography enables studies that respect traditional peoples as holders of rights (Machado, 2020).

It is important to observe that in addition to summoning the anthropologists Flávia de Mello and Daisy Barcellos to testify, because they coordinated specific anthropological reports under investigation, the then president of the ABA, Antonio Carlos de Souza Lima, was invited. However, the chair of the PCI favoured other deponents on the same date as his participation and the ABA was not heard<sup>25</sup>. Like the ABA, civil society organisations and social movements were not offered the space to participate in the meetings. As can be seen in its documents (Brasil 2016, 2017), the PCI made abundant mention of organisations, including the Instituto Socioambiental (ISA) [Socio-environmental Institute], Centro de Trabalho Indigenista (CTI) [Indigenous Work Centre] and the Conselho Indigenista Missionário (CIMI) [Indigenous Missionary Council], with allegations of collusion, information trafficking, interference in the institutions and decisions of the FUNAI; however, no defence or counterarguments were allowed in the official spaces<sup>26</sup>.

Likewise, the participation of Indigenous and *Quilombola* organisations, such as the Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil (APIB) [Articulation of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil], the Coordenação Nacional de Articulação das Comunidades Negras Rurais Quilombolas (CONAQ) [National Coordination of the Articulation of Black Rural Quilombola Communities] and the Coordenação das Organizações Indígenas da Amazônia Brasileira (COIAB) [Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon] was not scheduled. What is clear is that the representative entities of Indigenous peoples and *Quilombolas* were completely ignored; they were not invited or summoned, nor were they discussed in the meetings, in the requests to establish PCI 1 (no. 16/2015) and 2 (no. 26/2016) or in the final report prepared and approved by the *Ruralista* caucus. Despite being silenced in the official records of the FUNAI-INCRA PCI, several representative institutions and leaders made public declarations to address the issues disclosed by the commission.

As I have discussed, the space of the FUNAI-INCRA PCI was controlled by the *Ruralista* caucus so that the conclusions expressed in the final report reflected its political agenda. Even though anthropologists Flávia de Mello and Daisy Barcellos had made relevant, informative statements during the PCI hearings, the final report repeated the same arguments seen in the requests for the PCI and those presented during the commission meetings. Moreover, in the final report of the FUNAI-INCRA PCI, the FPA representatives went

25 Antonio Carlos de Souza Lima spent an entire afternoon waiting to be called to testify in the PCI, in an internal room of the commission. The ABA's participation was not rescheduled.

26 There was an attempt to access banking and fiscal data of the institutions (ABA, ISA, CTI and CIMI), as well as that of their legal representatives, but this was prevented by the courts.

further, presenting requests for the indictment of around 130 people<sup>27</sup>, only four of whom had actually appeared in commission hearings, including anthropologists Flávia de Mello and Daisy Barcellos. Thus, the PCI's final report addressed several issues that were not even discussed in commission hearings, but nevertheless resulted in indictments.

## Final considerations

As I hope to have shown, the FUNAI-INCRA PCI constructed its own narrative concerning Brazilian anthropology and its professionals. As a group of the national political elite, the Ruralista caucus used this event as an expression and materialisation of their interests that dialogue directly with public policies for the redistribution of land to ethnically differentiated groups, Indigenous peoples and *Quilombolas*. In the broader sense, the centrality of the agrarian issue for agribusiness is evident. As Souza Lima (2015) pointed out, the idea of development for agribusiness implies progress over natural resources that naturally go against the territorial rights of traditional peoples and communities.

For the Ruralista caucus, the desired development for the country, in its various nuances – economic, social, political – collides with public policies implemented by the FUNAI and INCRA, and, consequently, with anthropology, the central discipline involved in the identification and delimitation of Indigenous and *Quilombola* traditional territories. The ideology of the Ruralista caucus, expressed in the PCI, is translated into its own agenda, into a project of power and development of their own, characteristic of an elite, to use Shore terms (2004).

The activities of the Ruralista caucus in the Legislative branch, a space where the conflict is legitimate, by means of an investigative instrument, the PCI, were marked by discursive practices and silencing that reinforced their worldview and their position of strength in the current configuration of power. The space of the PCI can be seen as a vector for the materialisation and conjunction of knowledges, shared values, ideologies and worldviews in physical documents, formal records that, based on their concreteness as state documents, could also be used in other spaces – other commissions, other spheres of public power, in conjunction with agribusiness sectors.

These projects were materialised in the final report approved by the commission. As the final report points out, 'misconceptions' of past public policies serve as a 'shield for a false protectionist discourse, hiding shady interests', such as personal enrichment, the weakening of national sovereignty, the 'expropriation and collectivisation of private property' and 'socioeconomic subjugation as an instrument for maintaining power' (Brasil, 2017: 2.523). This passage of the commission's final document highlights how representatives of the Ruralista caucus classified as deviations logics distinct from that of the private appropriation of land. Other forms, like holding collective titles to land for common use, do not fit into their concept of development and threaten the expansion of agribusiness, since they remove land from the real estate market.

The idea of land is linked to that of merchandise, one not aligned with the value attributed to land by Indigenous and traditional communities, for whom legitimate right is acquired through effective possession, based on consuetudinary or customary law. In this sense, Almeida (2010) emphasises that the growing global demand for land for agribusiness has triggered a process he called agrostrategies, where deterritorialisations imposed on Indigenous and traditional peoples are influenced by political actors. Agribusiness actors have

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27 The indictments are in chapter 9 of the final report of the FUNAI-INCRA PCI. Among the 130 requests for indictments, we identified 33 against indigenous persons, 23 against anthropologists, 18 against federal civil servants, 10 against former public administration managers (political appointments), 17 against federal lawyers, 2 against lawyers who represent the Republic, and 27 others.



made an effort to influence government policies aimed at the agribusiness sector, such as tax incentives, the regularisation of public lands, changes in regulations, including through the FPA (Almeida, 2010; Carneiro et al., 2017; Pompeia, 2018; Dalla Costa and Picelli, 2020).

Thus, agrostrategies have been intensified on several fronts within the state (Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches) aimed at removing administrative, political and legal obstacles that prevent the commercialisation of land, including those concerning conservation units and traditional territories. Regarding this point, as previously highlighted, anthropology has entered the sight of this political group for the role it plays, that is, when it enables 'a vision and a reality that previously had not found space (or power) for manifestation, and which, precisely for this reason, had not been codified' (Silva, 2015: 160).

Contrary to that presented during the FUNAI-INCRA PCI, the anthropological work of identifying and delimiting Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands does not give rise to local conflicts. Studies for the demarcation of ethnic territories, by means of the scientific techniques of anthropology, together with Indigenous and traditional knowledge, explain existing truths that were often suppressed in relations of force and symbolic violence (Ferreira, 2015). The social structure is based on latent, hidden ethnic and social conflict, in which the *Quilombolas* and Indigenous people unwillingly occupy the subaltern pole of this structure, often without the conditions to form open opposition. It is also essential to point out that the work of state agencies in the demarcation of traditional lands does not originate internally, rather it stems from the demand of the traditional group, that is, these demarcations occur as part of the community's internal process of fighting for its rights. It is based on contact between the different groups and, therefore, from the confrontation between the distinct logics of land appropriation, or in the terms of Cardoso de Oliveira (1976), in the interethnic friction that takes place during the process of affirming their identity. The anthropological report is not a cause of this process of self-affirmation, but a consequence, and during the report's elaboration, the conflicts are visible and previously established in the region.

Initially, the FUNAI-INCRA PCI, set up during the Ruralista caucus's defence of PEC 215, sought to gain more support for the draft amendment to transfer the constitutional obligation of demarcating Indigenous and *Quilombola* territories to the Legislative branch. However, during the PCI, President Dilma Rousseff was impeached, which led to the departure of the PT and its supporters from managerial positions in federal public bodies, including those responsible for land redistribution, INCRA and FUNAI.

Following the developments and the deepening consequences of the impeachment, the political groups that supported it gained wider access to the Executive branch after 13 years of PT governments. Thus, there was no longer a need to transfer the competence for the demarcation of Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands to the National Congress, since some of the representatives who worked for PEC 215 and were protagonists in the FUNAI-INCRA PCI began to occupy strategic positions in the Executive branch of the new government<sup>28</sup>. After this reorganisation of the Executive branch, a number of the actions that were under development to establish a larger role for the Legislative branch in the Ruralista agenda with regard to agrarian policy began to take a back seat, and this is what happened with PEC 215. In the PCI's final report, the chapter on propositions contains a request to the President of the Câmara dos Deputados that, when the vote on PEC 215 is inserted in the activities of the plenary, he should add the proposed suggestion to suppress the articles that had been inserted related to transferring the approval of demarcations to the Legislative branch 'in view of the latest events in this area' (Brasil, 2017: 3.083).

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28 On July 3, 2017, during the PCI (at the end of the second commission), then-President Michel Temer appointed Osmar Serraglio (PP/PR), Ruralista representative and member of the FUNAI-INCRA PCI, to the position of Minister of Justice. He was rapporteur for the special commission on PEC 215 [draft amendment to the Constitution], which approved the proposal that all demarcations should be ratified by the National Congress.

Based on the referral contained in the commission's final report, it becomes apparent that the impeachment of the President of the Republic, Dilma Rousseff, altered the course of the legislative dynamics that were being outlined, accelerating them. When the PCI was established, much was said about the use of this commission by the Ruralista caucus to support and consolidate the discourse that approved the legal-technical opinion of PEC 215 in a special commission, in order to put the vote to the plenary of the Câmara dos Deputados, with broad parliamentary support. On a macro level, the FUNAI-INCRA PCI was an important arena for the Ruralista caucus to present their alternatives for public land redistribution policies under the new national political scenario being constructed following the impeachment. The dynamics of the commission's operation provided a glimpse of the construction of the final report.

In its ethnographies, anthropology, as an area of knowledge that the state uses to identify the Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands that will be the object of demarcation, fully contemplates the various political, moral, ethical, and other elements involved in fieldwork. For this reason, not only was this area of knowledge on the PCI's radar, but also the ABA, which brings together researchers in the field. The ABA takes a public stand in defence of constitutional rights and guarantees, its practice in the public sphere, and its theoretical-methodological principles. Thus, Brazilian anthropology and the ABA can rightfully be considered 'engaged' and 'ideological', to use terms of the *Ruralista* caucus in the PCI, but only to the extent that they do not behave as passive spectators, nor do they ignore events in their scientific productions that affect the universe in which their research unfolds and which, for the majority of this group of anthropologists, is Brazil. There is no other way to conduct ethical, scientific anthropological research, that is, it is not possible to detach the field from the social and historical context in which it is inserted, to treat the subject as isolated in time and space, or avoid dialogues with traditional communities in order to apprehend their point of view to compose the analyses. As previously highlighted, the work of the anthropologist brings to light complex social entanglements that, in a latent form, are often taken for granted. By bringing dissenting voices to light, exposing the contradictions and differences in the forces at play, it is the work of the anthropologist, and no other, that puts the disputed issues on the table<sup>29</sup>.

Since the FUNAI-INCRA PCI, as anthropologists, we perceive that the allegation that something on which you disagreed is 'ideological' has become increasingly recurrent, when in reality, it is merely a matter of a divergent conception or orientation, that is, of another ideology. Since then, this has transformed into a widely used jargon, not only during the electoral campaign of the 2018 elections, but continues to be an important tool for differentiating the federal administration elected in 2019. Based on discussions in the FUNAI-INCRA PCI, the consolidation of a Ruralista project of power was observed that, following the election of Jair Bolsonaro as President of the Republic, became a government project for the demarcation of Indigenous lands, *Quilombola* territories and agrarian reform.

In the first few months of government, we saw actions aimed at implementing the conclusions presented in the final report of the PCI, with the extinction of Executive structures focused on family farming and traditional peoples and communities<sup>30</sup>, such as the Ministério do Desenvolvimento Agrário (MDA) [Ministry of Agrarian Development] and the Secretaria de Extrativismo e Desenvolvimento Rural Sustentável (SEDR) [Secretariat for Extractivism and Sustainable Rural Development] of the Ministério do Meio Ambiente (MMA) [Ministry of the Environment]. Bodies that concentrated activities of interest to agribusiness were reallocated

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29 As a result of the debates during the FUNAI-INCRA PCI, discussions among anthropology professionals concerning the regulation of the profession also intensified, since there was a noticeable increase in the number of self-styled anthropologists working in demarcation processes for Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands, whether hired by opposing interests, or inserted into institutions by the Bolsonaro government.

30 On the first day of government, Medida Provisória [Provisional Measure] no. 870/2019 was presented, which extinguished, renamed and united the ministries. In addition, the measure changed the attributions of the bodies. After a long process in the National Congress, the measure was transformed into Law no. 13,844.

to the Ministério da Agricultura e Pecuária e Abastecimento (MAPA) [Ministry for Agriculture, Livestock and Supply], including the *Serviço Florestal Brasileiro* [Brazilian Forestry Service] (previously housed in the MMA) and INCRA<sup>31</sup>.

An organisation of agribusiness agendas became evident in the government elected in 2019, particularly since we observed important actors from the Ruralista caucus who were involved in the PEC 215 and the FUNAI-INCRA PCI occupying positions in the upper echelons of the Executive branch under the new president. The Minister of Agriculture, Tereza Cristina (DEM/MS), was the rapporteur for the PCI; another commission rapporteur, Valdir Colatto (MDB/SC), was appointed chairman of the Brazilian Forestry Service; Luiz Henrique Mandetta (DEM/MS), 2<sup>nd</sup> vice-chairman of the commission, was appointed the first Health Minister in the Bolsonaro government, and tried to extinguish the Secretaria Especial de Saúde Indígena (SESAI) [Special Secretariat for Indigenous Health]. The president of the FUNAI-INCRA PCI, Alceu Moreira (MDB/RS), was re-elected as a federal representative and sworn in as president of the FPA in 2019, while another of the vice-chairmen of the commission, Luis Carlos Heinze (PP/RS), was elected as a Senator and secured a seat on the Comissão de Agricultura e Reforma Agrária (CRA) [Commission for Agriculture and Agrarian Reform], ensuring the continuity of the agribusiness alliance of the Ruralista caucus in Congress.

From these initial steps in government, the participation of agribusiness actors deepened within the structures of the Executive branch. At FUNAI, after an attempt to transfer the body to the agriculture portfolio at the beginning of the Bolsonaro government<sup>32</sup>, one of the advisors to the *Ruralista* representatives in the FUNAI-INCRA PCI, Marcelo Augusto Xavier da Silva, was appointed chairman. What we have observed in the FUNAI since then is the paralysis of the processes of demarcation of Indigenous lands, and the rigging of the FUNAI through the replacement of technical staff by trusted political appointees<sup>33</sup>. INCRA was similarly occupied by figures aligned with agribusiness and the land regularisation of *Quilombos* advanced no further, in addition to facing the sharpest budget reduction in the history of public policy<sup>34</sup>.

Following the first year of the Bolsonaro government, the onset of 2020 was marked by the arrival of a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in Brazil. The gravity imposed by the disease weighed especially on socially vulnerable populations, due to the lack of measures by the federal government to adequately combat the pandemic. The absence of effective actions resulted in deaths, economic crisis, and deepening social crises. Despite the delicate moment experienced, the pandemic scenario did not curb the advance of agendas

31 A Special Secretariat for Agrarian Affairs (SEAF) was created within the scope of Ministério da Agricultura e Pecuária e Abastecimento (MAPA) [Ministry for Agriculture, Livestock and Supply], to which INCRA was subordinated, and whose attributions included land management, environmental licensing of *Quilombos* and *Quilombola* demarcation. Nabhan Garcia, former president of the União Democrática Ruralista (UDR) [Rural Democratic Union], was appointed head of this secretariat.

32 Among the changes proposed in the ministerial organisation by the elected government was the transfer of the demarcation of Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands to the Ministry for Agriculture, Livestock and Supply (MAPA). However, considering intense Indigenous mobilisation, from numerous sectors of organised civil society, academia, the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office, and international pressure, the National Congress did not approve this change, maintaining the attributions of Indigenous demarcation within the FUNAI. Aligned with the agribusiness sectors, the new government presented a new provisional measure, aimed at transferring the demarcation of Indigenous lands to the Ministry of Agriculture. Supported by article 62, §10, of the Federal Constitution, which prohibits the reissue in the same legislative session of a provisional measure that has been rejected, on June 24, 2019, the President of the Federal Senate returned it to the President of the Republic declaring loss of effectiveness. At the same time, several parties filed Direct Actions of Unconstitutionality with the Supremo Tribunal Federal (STF) [Supreme Court] in order to block the action of the President of the Republic. On June 24, 2019, a monocratic precautionary measure was granted by the STF, which prevented the effectiveness of the provisional measure. The precautionary measure was unanimously endorsed by the plenary of the STF on August 1, 2019, ruling out the possibility of other manoeuvres by the presidential office on the matter.

33 Among the changes at the FUNAI, changes in the members of Working Groups to identify Indigenous lands should be highlighted, involving the substitution of qualified researchers, PhDs in Anthropology with experience in the field, for persons known to prepare identification *contra-laudos* (reports that were contrary to or advocated for the denial of identification and demarcation), together with the appointment of an evangelical missionary to the agency's Coordenação-Geral de Índios Isolados e de Recente Contato [General Coordination of Isolated and Recently Contacted Indians].

34 In 2020, the budget for *Quilombola* land regularisation was approximately R\$ 3 million (US\$ 590,000). In 2021, the budget was less than R\$ 300,000 (US\$ 56,000), a 90% reduction compared with 2020, when resources were already insufficient to meet the demand. For 2022, the budget proposal was R\$ 405,000 (US\$ 79,000). (US dollar amounts are based on the exchange averages for each year)

of interest to political and economic groups, such as Medida Provisória [Provisional Measure] 910/2019, which dealt with the regularisation of public areas owned by the federal government, transformed into Bill 2633/2020, popularly known as the Grilagem Bill [lit. Land grabbing Bill]; Bill 191/2020, which provides for mining on Indigenous lands; Bill 3729/2004, which preceded the Lei Geral de Licenciamento Ambiental [General Law on Environmental Licensing], making existing environmental norms less restrictive; and several other measures.

In this context, it is important to emphasise that the political groups operating at the highest level of the Executive branch have not yet managed to change the procedures for demarcating Indigenous lands and *Quilombola* territories, which they had defended since the FUNAI-INCRA PCI. Nevertheless, public servants who work in this area are under constant scrutiny, such that their professional practices are often examined and called into question. However, even without ideal conditions for their actuation, these bodies still operate based on identification and delimitation sustained by anthropological work. Right now, I understand that we have not yet seen the full unfolding of this story. The effects of this political strategy are still under development and a greater historical distance is required to be able to map them adequately.

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# Disputes on abortion and sexual diversity in the Chamber of Deputies in the early years of the Bolsonaro government: the art of marking differences

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## **Abstract**

The present article explores the disputes in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies about abortion and sexual diversity during the first two years of the Bolsonaro government (2019-2020). Focusing on the controversial moral themes of abortion and sexual diversity, the article examines legislative dynamics by analyzing statements made by congresspeople in the Chamber of Deputies and the legislative proposals they submitted. This article is based on qualitative research, observing the discursive dynamic of mutual accusations and inversion of arguments. Particularly noteworthy in this context was the heavy engagement of religious actors in the defense of conservative positions.

**Keywords:** abortion; sexual diversity; Chamber of Deputies; Bolsonaro government.

# Disputas sobre aborto e diversidade sexual na Câmara dos Deputados nos anos iniciais do governo Bolsonaro: da arte de marcar as diferenças

## Resumo

O artigo quer explorar as disputas na Câmara dos Deputados acerca dos temas do aborto e da diversidade sexual nos dois primeiros anos do governo Bolsonaro (2019-2020). Com o foco nos temas morais controversos do aborto e da diversidade sexual, o artigo vai examinar dinâmicas próprias do Legislativo por meio da análise de pronunciamentos enunciados por parlamentares na Câmara dos Deputados e das proposições legislativas submetidas. Trata-se de pesquisa qualitativa. Observa-se uma dinâmica discursiva de acusações mútuas e inversão de argumentos. Salienta-se o grande engajamento de atores religiosos na defesa das posições conservadoras.

**Palavras-chave:** aborto; diversidade sexual; Câmara dos Deputados; governo Bolsonaro.



# Disputes on abortion and sexual diversity in the Chamber of Deputies in the early years of the Bolsonaro government: the art of marking differences

*Naara Luna*

The present article seeks to explore disputes in the Chamber of Deputies on the issues of abortion and sexual diversity during the first two years of the Bolsonaro government (2019-2020).<sup>1</sup> The 2018 elections were the culmination of a process built over previous years which brought conservative segments to power in Brazil (Almeida, 2019), both in the Executive branch, where President Jair Bolsonaro served as an icon of the extreme right, and in the Legislative, where the PSL (the party of President Bolsonaro) elected the largest segment of the Chamber of Deputies and advanced upon the positions of the center (PSDB) and center right parties.

Focusing on the controversial moral issues of abortion and sexual diversity, the article analyzes the dynamics of the Legislature through an examination of pronouncements made by congressmen in the Chamber of Deputies and the legislative proposals they submitted.

This analysis will be done in the context of the lower house of congress, the Chamber of Deputies, an institution that is part of the Legislative Power in the Brazilian State. In this sense, the objective of this article is in line with “seeking to understand the State through its agents, the different interests that move them, their practices and strategies of struggle, and the devices of power that operate in different situations, whether spectacular events or daily routines. This is what we have called in our investigations ‘researching the making of the State’” (Teixeira, Lobo and Abreu, 2019, p. 10-11).

Looking at this “making a State”, specifically in the legislative sphere, several aspects can be explored. For example, the first year of a congressperson’s tenure in the legislature allows them to make their inaugural presentation speeches, where they put forward their main focuses and objectives of their mandate. Another aspect is the use of speeches and different types of legislative proposals. Speeches are a means of conveying denunciations and accusations or of publicly advertising certain values. Often, a sequence of speeches is structured around a particular controversial topic. On other occasions, issues such as abortion and sexual diversity are not discussed per se but are foci for disputes over the positions of the left and right, employed as accusatory categories. There is also the differentiated scope of legislative proposals: the bills and projects (laws, complementary laws, constitutional decrees, proposed amendments to the Constitution) that aim to regulate matters, creating or changing rules and legislation. Official requests, on the other hand, have different objectives from mobilizations: they seek to acquire information, mark a commemorative date, convene a hearing, or institute a Commission of Inquiry. Many disputes become visible regarding the themes studied here (sexual diversity and gender) through provocations and responses which show up in speeches and propositions.

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<sup>1</sup> The present article results from the “Religious values and controversial moral themes: customs, conservatism and resistance”, research project, financed with a level 2 research productivity grant from CNPq. I would like to thank my research assistant Renan Benevides Chiletto, CNPq scientific initiation fellow, for surveying the legislative material.

One last aspect of this scenario which must be observed is the relationship between the Legislature and the other powers: particularly the inspection of the Executive branch's activities, which shows up as criticism or praise. There are also clashes with the Judiciary, especially with the Federal Supreme Court regarding the attributions of powers. These are often replete with accusations of judicial activism.

Considering the group that supports Bolsonaro and those who oppose him, congresspeople on both sides present their own group as being persecuted and attack opponents. In addition to the fact that these debates employ accusations against the left and against the Bolsonaro government, as well as criticisms of the judicial activism of the STF, one finds thematic cores that are privileged in the speeches and legislative proposals congresspeople present. These include anti-gender perspectives (or "anti-gender ideology"), defenses of the traditional heteronormative family, criticism of the LGBT movement, accusations of privileges, declarations of the rights of the fetus, defenses of religious freedom, and criticism of cultural productions. Other topics include the denunciation of violence and discrimination against LGBT people by the State and civil society, measures to protect LGBT people, and the defense of the right to legal abortion.

These thematic nuclei reveal the nodes around which conflicts are structured. In the words of Natividade and Oliveira (2013), these are the "new sexual wars", like the religious wars of the past, "wars are fought around certain sexual differences" (2013, p. 25) and around reproductive governance, I would add, as in the case of the debate on abortion and fertility control.

Another point highlighted in these conflicts concerns religious expressions/manifestations, especially during plenary pronouncements, that are opposed to the separation of Church and State, which historically refers to the "emancipation of the State and public education from ecclesiastical powers and all religious references and legitimation" (Mariano, 2011, p. 244). The present article wants to understand the dynamics of legitimacy formation processes (Montero, 2012); how these are built even in tension with the competing principles they are associated with.

As a topic of current affairs, there are also references to the management of the pandemic, answered by anti-abortion speeches and in defense of the traditional family.

## Methodology

Support for accessing the discourses under analysis comes from textual sources containing "methodologically relevant and socially significant information" (Giumbelli, 2002: 102).

This article deals with speeches given in the Chamber of Deputies and with legislative proposals as textual sources, that is, the result of a procedure carried out by a State institution. These are documents produced in the context of State institutions:

The documents produced by State institutions can be plagued with formalisms, technical terms, rules of courtesy, and redacted imperatives taking the form of objectives or attributions. This bureaucratic format... challenges the investigator with the need to learn a highly formulaic and cryptic vocabulary (Muzopappa and Villalta, 2011, p. 31).

The research behind this article was carried out through using the search engine of the Chamber of Deputies portal, in the legislative activity menu, by searching for the keywords of the thematic axes in the options 1. legislative proposals; and 2. speeches. Documents were first classified according to their position: whether anti-abortion, pro-choice, or undefined; or if favorable to sexual diversity, against it, or undefined. In the thematic axis regarding abortion, 37 speeches and 31 legislative proposals were found in 2019. Regarding sexual diversity, 262 speeches and 51 legislative proposals were found in 2019, and 63 speeches and 29 legislative proposals in 2020. Due to the excessive amount of material, it will not be possible to analyze all these documents

in the present article. We thus chose 2019 as the most representative year for debate dynamics. In 2020, the selection was restricted to documents referring to major controversies that involved both sides, or which contained content with the potential to forcefully affect the exercise of rights. 85 pronouncements from 2019 and 2020 are effectively analyzed in this article along with 48 legislative proposals.

In addition to document classification, our initial survey sought to outline the profile of congresspeople with regard to their training, professional activity, and religion,<sup>2</sup> using the data available in their profiles on the Portal of the Chamber of Deputies, the statements made in the documents surveyed, their profile on social networks, and press material.

The methodology used to examine the material we collected was content and discourse analysis. “Content analysis takes the text as a restricted document to be understood as an illustration of a situation, limited to its own context. In this case, it starts from the structure of the text in order to interpret it” (Cappelle, Melo and Gonçalves, 2003, p. 13). Discourse analysis was also used, considering how the text “works in a given social and historical context” (Cappelle et al., 2003, p.13). With regard to discourse, “this work is interested in both aspects: discourse as an instrument for the social construction of reality and discourse as an instrument of power and control”. (Barros, Bernardes and Pinto, 2018, p. 219)

The biggest difference between the two forms of analysis is that DA [discourse analysis] works with meaning and not with content; CA [content analysis] works with the content, that is, with linguistic materiality through the empirical conditions of the text, establishing (p. 683) categories for its interpretation. While DA searches for the effects of meaning related to discourse, CA focuses only on the content of the text, without establishing relations beyond this. (Caregnato and Mutti, 2006, p. 683-684)

The units of collection and analysis used for content analysis are pronouncements given by congresspeople of the Federal Chamber of Deputies in the 2019 and 2020, as well as legislative proposals put before the Chamber.

The keywords used in the legislative house’s search engine to locate such speeches and proposals constitute our categories of analysis, extracted from the major thematic axes of abortion (which includes the status of the unborn child) and sexual diversity.

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<sup>2</sup> In the case of religion, for the present article, the last conference was held at the Platform Religion and Power, organized by ISER, using the database of the 56th legislature. Available at: <https://religioepoder.org.br/>

**Table 1** – Keywords used in searches, according to thematic axis

<b>Abortion – status of the unborn child</b>	<b>Sexual diversity</b>
abortion	LGBT, LGBTQI
embryo	sexual orientation
unborn	homosexual, homosexuals
in vitro fertilization	homosexuality, homosexuality
assisted reproduction	gay, gays
	lesbian, lesbians
	homophobia
	lesbophobia
	transphobia
	transgender
	transvestite
	same-sex marriage
	civil union
	civil partnership
	sexual option
	gender ideology

Source: Chamber of Deputies Internet Portal

Based on the units of analysis (speeches and legislative proposals) located through the keywords, it was possible for us to delineate thematic nuclei, or categories of analysis, which will be discussed below.<sup>3</sup>

Methodology studies oppose content analysis and discourse analysis due to the different histories of the creation of techniques and principles of formulation. Rocha and Deusdará (2005) suggest that there is a positivist bias in content analysis. This is in contrast with discourse analysis, which does not dissociate discourse from society, proposing “the understanding of a discursive plan that articulates language and society, interspersed by the ideological context” (Rocha and Deusdará, 2005, p. 308).

The perspective of the present work employs the proposal made by Cappelle, Melo and Gonçalves (2003) regarding the convergent use of these techniques, considering both content and the context and their implications. Chaves states that, in discourse analysis, text and context are the object of examination:

*Context* is the historical-social situation of a text, which involves human *institutions* and other texts. It is *the frame of a text* or the situational and circumstantial frame in which a text occurs. It involves elements from both the author’s and the interlocutor’s realities. Analyzing these elements helps determine meaning. When interpreting a text, the author and his/her social and historical identity must be considered. In discourse, the identity of the author is constructed. Therefore, the same phrase can change its meaning in different interpretative contexts (Chaves, 2016, p. 492).

<sup>3</sup> Since this is an eminently qualitative research proposal, procedures established by specialists in categorical content analysis (Sampaio and Lycarião, 2021) -- such as the elaboration of a codebook and coding spreadsheet -- will not be used.

The objective of this article, in analyzing discursive disputes, certainly leaves the scope of content analysis and falls into discourse analysis, as this study is constantly confronting which actors speak through pronouncements and legislative proposals, situating these actors as supporters of the Bolsonaro government or its opponents. Here, the ideological divisions of “right” and “left” do more than refer to the political spectrum: they become a significant part of the speeches, employed as categories of accusation.

Discourse analysis in the present study was carried out according to the following steps, based on Chaves (2016).

1. Formulation of the research problem and its objectives; in this case, verifying the disputes around abortion and sexual diversity in the first two years of the Bolsonaro government.
2. Definition of the material *corpus* in accordance with the proposed investigation. The main base is the pronouncements (speeches) of congresspeople given in the Chamber of Deputies in 2019 and 2020. A second base is the legislative proposals presented in that same year.
3. Selection of documents using the keyword search tool of the Chamber of Deputies Portal. The keywords are extracted from two thematic axes: abortion (including the status or condition of the unborn child) and sexual diversity.<sup>4</sup>
4. Classification and categorization of the empirical material based on the research objectives. Here, a careful reading shows regularities around topics addressed in pronouncements and legislative proposals. Thematic nuclei are formulated based on topics that are highlighted in the speeches and legislative proposals: anti-gender perspectives (or “anti-gender ideology”), defense of the traditional heteronormative family, criticism of the LGBT movement, accusation of privileges, defense of fetal rights, defense of religion and religious freedom, criticism of cultural production, and criticism of judicial activism on the part of the STF, the latter being a point associated with several topics in this set. On the other side of the debates, the thematic nuclei are denunciation of violence and discrimination against LGBT people by the State and civil society, measures to protect LGBT people; defense of the right to choose abortion, defense of sexual diversity, and defense of the gender perspective.
5. Organize in chronological terms the material extracted from the speeches, associating the thematic nuclei with discursive dynamics, such as a dynamic of provocation and response with an exchange of accusations, similar to the so-called game of challenge and response (Bourdieu, 1965). Here, we go beyond the content of pronouncements and legislative proposals to analyze their use and argumentative strategies. We see that a significant part of the speeches are structured to criticize the left and disqualify its claims while at the same time serving as a support base for the Bolsonaro government. This discursive set is opposed by a second set critical of the Bolsonaro government. Analysis shows that there is a dynamic of provocation and response within the universe of speeches made in the Chamber of Deputies. This dynamic also has repercussions upon external facts that are brought into this arena, such as a case that turns into a scandal involving the authorization (or denial) of legal abortion and the connections surrounding it. This analytical material is especially interesting, and goes beyond content analysis by demonstrating how arguments are wielded.

The article will initially address the debates in 2019, the first year of the Bolsonaro government and the new legislature, and then looks at highlights from 2020, a year marked, from mid-March on, by the pandemic.

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<sup>4</sup> These are the same words used above for searching during the content analysis methodology.

## 2019: speeches in the inaugural year of the Bolsonaro government

2019 saw the inauguration of several parliamentarians elected in the “Bolsonarist wave” that claimed it intended to moralize Brazil after a succession of elected leftist governments. Although the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff took place in 2016, with the departure of the PT from power, the rhetoric deployed in 2019 marked the beginning of a new era. Below, I describe the pronouncements and propositions made in this year based on the thematic nuclei, chronologically ordering to reveal the development of the debates.

### Defense of religion and freedom to be conservative

I first want to highlight opening speeches by two congresspeople who will have an major role in the themes we discuss here.

On 02/05/19, Deputy Chris Tonietto (PSL – RJ) thanked voters for helping her win the 2018 elections and signed a commitment to “*Christ, King of the Universe, Our Lady of Aparecida, Patroness of Brazil*” for a mandate guided by Catholic morals in the “*defense of life, from conception on, in defense of the family, and of Christian values, in the fight against abortion, gender ideology, corruption, and criminality*”.

In addition to being an inauguration speech, showing the main objectives of the deputy’s mandate, the speech explicitly employed religious language. There are other examples.

On 02/20/19, Deputy Pastor Sargento Isidório (Avante – BA) began his speech by thanking God and his voters for his mandate and read a verse from the Bible: “With the Bible in hand, I read Psalm 133”. The deputy also talked a little about his life story and the social work he carried out at Fundação Dr. Jesus. Here we have two congresspeople with public religious identities. Chris is Catholic and Isidório is Evangelical. As seen in several other studies (M.D.C. Machado, 2017; L.Z. Machado, 2017; Vital da Cunha and Lopes, 2013), religious agents have been the most active in the political arena regarding issues such as abortion and sexuality, exercising a conservative religious influence (Vaggione, 2012).

Congresspeople stood out among those who most frequently employed explicitly religious language. Deputy Chris Tonietto (PSL – RJ), began her speech on 7/4/2019 by saying a Hail Mary in the plenary and talking about the motivations that led her to politics. “*Brazil was born Catholic and will never cease to be so in essence!*” She highlighted that during her 5 months in office, she produced several projects to “*combat the murder of babies in the maternal womb*”.

On 6/5/19, Pastor Sergeant Isidório (AVANTE – BA) spoke about “ex-gays”, using religious discourses to impose heteronormativity as a divine creation: “God created male and female, God created male and female, and blessed them. And what goes beyond that, according to the word of God, is of evil origin.”

Such speeches point to the problem of freedom of religious expression and attack the principle of separation of Church and State. Thus, on 7/4/2019, Evangelical Deputy José Medeiros (PODE-MT) says: “A pastor cannot be branded as homophobic because he believes, because his faith is like that. (...) I make this balance, this counterpoint so that we can have religious tolerance, so that we don’t mix the political struggle with our ideological bias, with people’s faith”. Religious freedom is here the justification for the defense of conservative positions.

In addition, several newly minted congresspeople will defend their positions alleging persecution and intolerance towards the Christian religion. On 04/25/19, in a critical speech to the STF for passing judgements upon the criminalization of homophobia and the decriminalization of abortion, Eli Borges (SD - TO), evangelical and pastor of the Assembly of God, claimed that there is persecution of Christians around the world. He defended that people have the freedom to choose their religions and that any “Christophobic” attitudes are to be repudiated. It is in this sense that Borges began his discourse on homophobia and abortion. Regarding abortion, the deputy used the Bible to support his opinion and said:

The Bible says, in Psalm 139.16, that God knows and knew the body of each one of us still without form. And we have to understand that, from the moment we are conceived, there is already a life, and it belongs to God.

On 06/17/19, Eli Borges (SD – TO) once again took up religious arguments when questioning whether the STF would consider the Bible to be a homophobic book, as homoaffectivity is “*contrary to the principle of creation, which is the principle of science and biology*”. He questioned whether the STF considered itself to be “above” the Bible. Pastors, priests and faithful, in tBorges’ conception, do not promote hatred towards the LGBT community by preaching their faith. Borges (SD – TO) went on to state that most crimes against the LGBT population are crimes of passion, denying LGBTphobia and claiming that there is, in fact, a Christophobia:

We are left here, allowing someone, by repeating it several times, to start to get into the minds of Brazilians that homophobia is a practice in Brazil. Now, we have much more Christophobia here.

Borges uses the inversion of accusations of intolerance and persecution as rhetoric, something that will frequently recur in the discursive disputes analyzed here. This rhetoric manifests the process of minoritization, that is, of constituting a policy of minorities claiming rights, a process that was identified by Burity and Giumbelli among religious actors (2020), especially in the evangelical milieu. Aspects of minoritization pointed out by Burity among Pentecostals are the encouragement of intragroup solidarity and organization against supposed secularist threats to religious freedom (Burity, 2016, p. 120). The examples found above portray exactly this type of alleged “Christophobic” persecution by secular means. According to Burity and Giumbelli, “Evangelicals have been shrewdly managing the alternation between constituting themselves as a minority and asserting themselves as part of a majority” (2020, p.11), thus sometimes placing themselves as a persecuted minority, sometimes joining Catholics to demonstrate the strength of the Christian majority in Brazil. This rhetoric is quite visible when Christian congresspeople (Evangelical or Catholic) claim to be victims of Christophobia (or that Christophobia is more intense than homophobia) at times, while at other times they characterize Christianity as a majority to defend conservative agendas.

## Criticism of cultural manifestations

This defensive conservative position was also manifested in reaction to cultural manifestations judged to be offensive to religious people. On 06/13/19, Fernando Rodolfo (PL – PE), an evangelical, denounced blasphemy in cultural events: a concert by singer Johnny Hooker, who said that Jesus was a fag, a *travesti* and a transsexual<sup>5</sup>; the front commission of the Gaviões da Fiel Samba School, which took to the avenue at Carnival portraying a clash between Jesus and Satan<sup>6</sup>; and a YouTube video on the channel Porta dos Fundos, which showed a homoaffective kiss between Jesus and Judas<sup>7</sup>.

5 Available at: <https://oglobo.globo.com/cultura/johnny-hooker-alvo-de-noticia-crime-apos-show-polemico-em-pernambuco-22935738>. Accessed on: 09/08/19.

6 Available at: <https://veja.abril.com.br/entretenimento/o-bem-vence-no-final-diz-coreografo-da-gavioes-da-fiel-sobre-desfile/>. Accessed on: 08/09/19;

7 Available at: <https://observatoriog.bol.uol.com.br/noticias/2019/05/novo-video-do-porta-dos-fundos-mostra-beijo-gay-entre-judas-e-jesus-assista>. Accessed on: 09/08/19.

## Anti-gender perspectives

One of the favorite themes of this moralizing wave revolved around the accusatory category of “gender ideology”, especially invoked in the context of early childhood education. The discourse of criticism of a supposed gender ideology began in the Brazilian congress, especially in the context of debates on the national education plan in 2014, a process discussed by several authors (Teixeira and Biroli, 2022; Luna, 2017). It has a strong presence among agents who have a religious identity, although it is not restricted to this segment. The origins of the anti-gender movement are described by Machado (2018) as arising from a reaction by intellectuals linked to Catholicism against the inclusion of the category of gender in the social conferences of the United Nations.

On 05/16/19, Otoni de Paula (PSC – RJ), evangelical and pastor of the Assembly of God, spoke about “gender ideology” in the schools. He began his speech by stating that Brazil had a lost generation in terms of sexual health and, even though he “*respects citizens with homosexual orientation, I cannot tolerate gender ideology within our schools*”. The congressman then called schools a “*factory for gays and lesbians*”. According to him, children and teenagers are confused about their sexuality in schools, but teachers and psychologists can’t do anything about it because “*LGBT patrols don’t allow it*”. This accusation of the sexualization of children is recurrent when the category “gender ideology” is activated (Luna, 2017; Teixeira and Biroli, 2022)

## Criticism of the LGBT movement and accusation of privileges

The end of the above speech leads to another point that is often repeated in the pronouncements analyzed here: criticism of the LGBT movement and accusations of privileges, a process analyzed by Cesarino (2019). On 07/11/2019, for example, Deputy Otoni de Paula (PSC-RJ) made a statement that focused on the issue of special entrance exams for transgender and intersex people in public universities, criticizing the use of public money for this purpose.

Other speeches further emphasized these accusations of privilege, as in the pronouncement made on 05/23/19 by Marcelo Brum, (PSL – RJ), evangelical, from the Assembly of God:

The Constitution and Justice Commission of the Senate approved the criminalization of homophobia this week, and I am concerned, as the Christian that I am, with the family. I’m worried about the family. Why would a class of people want to be superior? Why would a class want to have a special law just for its protection? It means a division of society. We are all equal before the law. There cannot be a special law for a class of people.

Here, the protection of minorities is resignified as a privilege. In a similar sense, derision is formulated at accusations of discrimination as “poor behavior” and “victimism”, which repeated the mockery of candidate Jair Bolsonaro during his election campaign.<sup>8</sup> In this discursive dynamic, accusations of “victimism” against the claims of identity politics is denounced as a divisive factor in Brazilian society (Cesarino, 2019).

On 06/17/19, Otoni de Paula (PSC – RJ) and Deputy Bibo Nunes (PSL – RS), Catholic, made speeches in response to Deputy Sâmia Bomfim, as a few minutes earlier, she had stated that Deputy David Miranda (PSOL - RJ) had suffered homophobic attacks in the Chamber of Deputies. Bibo Nunes stated: “I heard, here in this house, a deputy say that there was a homophobic attack. This deputy is contumacious in their *coitadismo* and victimism”. Thus expression “coitadismo” (poor-me-ism), a term coined by Bolsonaro, was here recovered and repeated by supporters of the president.

8 Stephen Bertoni. “‘Everything is victimism’, says Bolsonaro about blacks, women and northeasterners”. See, 10/23/2018. Available at: <https://veja.abril.com.br/politica/tudo-e-coitadismo-diz-bolsonaro-sobre-negros-mulheres-e-nordestinos/>. Accessed on 10/10/2022.



## Criticism from left and progressive segments

A significant part of the references to the themes of abortion and sexual diversity take place in the context of accusations and criticisms from the left. On 02/13/2019, Deputy Daniel Silveira (PSL – RJ) gave a speech in reaction to statements by deputies from leftist parties. He claims that leftists in congress were suddenly interested in morality, after having been silent during years of left-wing government, which financed works in other countries and was favorable to the sexualization of children, abortion, and the decriminalization of drugs.

Analyzing the pronouncement, we note that these themes are not debated, just blurted out in order to disqualify the leftist opposition.

These themes are also mentioned in controversies involving statements by members of the federal government, which reverberate among and are defended by members of Congress. Universities and the studies developed within them are criticized, disqualifying research due to morality. In April 2019, Minister of Education Abraham Weintraub announced that the Universities that had low academic performance and promoted “chaos” would receive budget cuts<sup>9</sup>. This statement generated controversy and protests throughout Brazil. On 05/15/19, Deputy Carlos Jordy (PSL – RJ), a Catholic, also spoke about the theme. He declared that the statement by the Minister of Education regarding the supposed turmoil in the Universities was true and highlighted examples. Commenting on the title of Victor Hugo de Souza Barreto’s doctoral thesis (from the Department of Anthropology at the Fluminense Federal University), which studied homosexual orgies in Rio de Janeiro<sup>10</sup>, the deputy questioned whether this was what a university was for. The second case cited also involved UFF. Jordy read the title of a G1 article about satanic parties on the University campus: “*UFF will investigate accusations of parties with satanic rituals, drugs and orgies*”<sup>11</sup>. On the same day, Deputy Dayane Pimentel (PSL – BA), an evangelical member of the Assembly of God, criticized investment in research, citing two master’s dissertations in the field of Psychology on account of their titles: “Here are some products [of the universities]: “... desire, excitement and pleasure among male escorts with homosexual practices in Recife “. [Or], if you prefer, “Revelry of the prolapsed assholes: bizarre pornography and sexual pleasure among women” - Federal University of Pernambuco”.

It is noteworthy that these examples of work considered to be unworthy of funding are both research into sexuality, in contexts associated with practices considered to be licentious.

An example of the dynamics with disputes from opposing sides emerged after a commemorative event in the Chamber on 06/24/19: the Solemn Session regarding the 50th anniversary of Stonewall,<sup>12</sup> when singer Daniela Mercury, one of the honorees, kissed her wife. On 06/26/19, four parliamentarians spoke out against the kiss, accusing it of being disrespectful: Otoni de Paula (PSC-RJ, pastor of the Assembly), Bibó Nunes (PSL – RS), Pastor Eurico (PATRIOTA – PE- Evangelical, Assembly of God), Glaustin da Fokus (PSC – GO, evangelical, Assembly of God). Three pronouncements defended the legitimacy of the kiss, however. These were made by David Miranda (PSOL – RJ), Fernanda Melchionna (PSOL – RS), Jandira Feghali (PCdoB – RJ).

9 Available at: <https://educacao.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,mec-cortara-verba-de-universidade-por-balburdia-e-ja-mira-unb-uff-e-ufba,70002809579>. Accessed on: 8/9/19.

10 Available at: <https://www.gazetadopovo.com.br/educacao/em-universidade-federal-doutorado-sobre-orgias-gays-tempparticipacao-especial-de-autor-3eppke8i3rfdghp29hacdbj6l/>. Accessed on: 09/08/19.

11 Available at: <http://g1.globo.com/rj/regiao-dos-lagos/noticia/2014/05/uff-vai-apurar-denuncia-de-festa-com-ritual-satanico-drogas-e-orgias.html>. Accessed on: 09/08/19.

12 This was the Stonewall Uprising that took place on 6/28/1969 in New York. Considered to be the birthplace of the LGBT movement, when customers resisted a police raid on a gay bar. “Stonewall riots gave birth to the current movement for LGBTQIAP+ rights”. Available at: <https://www.nationalgeographicbrasil.com/cultura/2021/06/gay-lgbt-revolta-de-stonewall-movimento-atual-pelos-direitos-lgbtqia>

Commenting on the main themes of the speeches in favor of sexual diversity in 2019, most of these were related to allegations of violation of the rights of the LGBT population. There were also a series of speeches criticizing the federal government or the president for allowing violence against the LGBT people or for making directly LGBTphobic or homophobic statements. Another set are complaints against the violence suffered by LGBT subjects or statistics regarding deaths and violence among this population. There are speeches honoring individuals for their struggles. The person most mentioned in these speeches was Councilor Marielle Franco, a city councilwoman from Rio who was in favor of LGBT rights. Psychiatrist Nise Silveira is also mentioned twice for her role in improving the treatment of mental patients, in a context in which discriminated social categories were hospitalized, with homosexuals being mentioned. There are some mentions of the exercise of professors' and teachers' work, criticizing gag rules, movements such as Escola sem Partido (School Without Parties), and the dissemination of false ideas such as "gender ideology". There were also mentions of fake news. In a similar sense, one speech referred to the ideological construction of ENEM college entrance exams, indirectly referring to, but no explicitly mentioning, the themes under analysis here. There was a speech defending a trans congresswoman (State Deputy *Érica* Malunguinho of the PSOL, from São Paulo). Deputy David Miranda sometimes spoke up to defend himself against offenses and accusations, situating himself as a discriminated LGBT person who also belonged to other minorities (black; from the favela). The vast majority of these pro-diversity speeches were given by left-wing parliamentarians, but there were some demonstrations by parliamentarians from center and right-wing parties.

### **Legislative propositions, 1st semester, 2019**

Another major part of parliamentary activity occurred through the authorship of legislative proposals.

#### The fetal rights theme group

The militancy of a young Catholic deputy in her first term stands out with regards to the thematic axis of abortion, Chris Tonietto (PSL – RJ) was the author of Bill No. 564/2019, which "*provides for the representation and defense of the interests of the unborn child*". The project stripped mothers of the right to legally respond for the fetus in cases in which there is a "*conflict of interest between the mother and the unborn child*".

Tonietto was also the author of Request N° 1983/2019, which "*Requires the creation of a Joint Parliamentary Front against Abortion and in Defense of Life*". The objectives of the Front were "*supervising and monitoring programs and government public policies aimed at protecting and guaranteeing the rights to life of pregnant women and unborn children and that act against the criminal practice of abortion*". Both are examples of militancy for fetal rights which, although they mention defense of pregnant women's lives, subordinates women to fetuses, which are understood to be an independent subject with interests. We found no pro-choice legislative proposals in the 1st half of the legislative session of 2019, which suggests the low engagement, already revealed in previous surveys, which show a tendency towards a reduction in the number of pro-choice demonstrations (Luna, 2019; Miguel, Biroli, Mariano, 2017).

With regard to the sexual diversity thematic axis of, some legislative proposals during this period were clearly anti-diversity:

**Table 2** – Anti-gender perspective legislative proposals (2019)

Congressperson	Party	Legislative proposal	Subject of the proposal
Carla Zambelli	PSL – SP	Bill No. 3492/2019	Amends Arts . 75, 121 and 129 of the Penal Code to provide for homicide and bodily harm to children and adolescents as qualifying circumstances for the crime of homicide and bodily harm, and art. 1 of Law nº 8.072/1990, to include homicide against children and adolescents and to impose gender ideology on the list of heinous crimes.
Bia Kicis	PSL - DF		
Eduardo Bolsonaro	PSL - SP		
Chris Tonietto	PSL – RJ	Application No. 136/2019	Requests the holding of a Solemn Session to celebrate the Day of Combating Gender Ideology.
Pastor Sergeant Isidorio	AVANT - BA	Bill No. 2587/2019	Regulates the profession of Psychologist to allow the treatment of cases of adjustment problems and psychological disorders, including those related to gender identity and sexual orientation.

Source: Chamber of Deputies Internet Portal

The criminalization or combating of gender ideology and defenses of the so-called “gay cure” are in the thematic sphere of criticism of the concept of gender and the defense of the heteronormative family. These positions contrary to sexual diversity were taken by congresspeople, almost all of whom have a public religious identity: Chris Tonietto and Bia Kicis (Catholics), Eduardo Bolsonaro (Baptist evangelical), and Pastor Sargento Isidório (Evangelical, Assembly of God).

### Opposition to the Federal Supreme Court (STF) – discursive strategies

Another aspect of this right wing militancy were the positions taken against Federal Supreme Court’s (STF) liberalizing decisions regarding the rights of women and LGBT people (L.Z. Machado, 2017), which are accused of being judicial activism. Deputy Márcio Labre (PSL - RJ), a Catholic, was the author of Bill No. 3266/2019, which adds a *Parágrafo Único* ao *Artigo 1º* da *Lei nº 7.716/1989*, punishing discrimination or prejudice based on race, color, ethnicity, religion, and national origin. The paragraph to be added determines that “*It does not fit, not even in an analogous way, under any circumstances and at any time, in the typifications of a crime of racial or color prejudice, homophobia or [prejudice against] another form of sexual orientation.*” This was a reaction to the decision of the *Ação Direta de Inconstitucionalidade por Omissão 26 (ADO 26)*, criminalizing homophobia and transphobia in “translating expressions of racism... understood in its social dimension”.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Cf. <https://www.conjur.com.br/dl/teses-stf-criminalizacao-homofobiai.pdf>. The trial concluded on 06/13/2022. Cf. <https://jus.com.br/artigos/74804/marco-inicial-da-eficacia-vinculante-da-decisao-na-ado-26-e-ampliacao-do-conceito-de-racismo-somente-no-ambito-da-lei-7-716-89>.

In addition to several speeches protesting against the so-called “judicial activism” of the STF,<sup>14</sup> especially regarding abortion and the criminalization of homophobia, congressmen employed the tactic of claiming to be defenders of life and the traditional family -- that is, against the legalization of abortion and the exercise of sexual diversity. They presented legislative proposals to demonstrate to their base that the National Congress was not ignoring these problems and was therefore the only legitimate actor to comment on legislation. Along these lines, Sóstenes Cavalcante (DEM – RJ) became the author of Bill No. 3453/2019 that amends the Penal Code “to insert, in crimes of homicide and bodily injury increased penalties when these crimes are motivated by the transsexuality and/or sexual orientation of the victim”. This amendment sought to increase the penalties in these cases from 1/3rd to half. The Deputy also submitted Requerimento N° 1757/2019, sending a Indication to the President of the STF, Minister José Antônio Dias Toffoli, requesting the suspension or postponement of the judgment of ADO 26, due to the processing of the aforementioned bill. In the justification for both bills, Cavalcante argued that: “once the alleged legislative omission has been removed, there is no justification for the continuation of the aforementioned judgment, since the reasoning of ADO 26 is limited precisely to the alleged need to fill the legal vacuum...” The strategy here was to propose a bill that was unlikely to be approved by the National Congress, in order to remove judgement on the crime in question beyond the immediate reach of the STF.

In the same sense, Eli Borges (SDD - TO) submitted Requerimento N° 1757/2019, requesting the reconsideration of all bills that dealt with the subject of homophobia. The bills pointed out by him were: PL n.º 2.057/2019; PL n.º 7.582/2014; PL n.º 2.138/2015; PL n.º 8.540/2017; and PL 3.453/2019. In justifying his position, Borges pointed out that the STF was making judgments regarding the issue and that he believed this was properly the bailiwick of the National Congress. He proposed “the joining together of all the projects that deal with the subject, with the aim of unifying the debates, thus allowing the debate to be expanded, and [assuring] that the legislation produced reflects the representations and desires of society.” Another initiative came from Deputy Pastor Marco Feliciano (PODE – SP), evangelical (Assembleia de Deus), author of Projeto de Lei N° 2672/2019, which “Amends Law No. 7,716, of January 5, 1989, to provide for crimes resulting from discrimination or prejudice based on race, color, ethnicity, religion, national origin, or sexual orientation”. The PL sought to amend the very law on which the STF was deliberating in ADO 26, by including “sexual orientation”. In the First Paragraph of Article 1, it protects from the law “those who profess a dissenting view regarding certain social behaviors, provided that these take place in the context of the regular use of the rights of freedom of belief and free exercise of religion, and that they do not incite the practice of violence”. However, on 5/8/19, the Deputy also presented Requerimento N° 1410/2019, that removed Projeto de Lei N° 2672/2019 from the floor of Congress.

It is important to remember that in these discursive dispute there were also several pronouncements in favor of the STF’s decisions regarding the interpretation of homophobia as a crime: Bacelar (PODE – BA) on 02/20/19 , Alencar Santana Braga (PT – SP) on 05/23/19 , Erika Kokay (PT-DF) on 02/13/19, 02/21/19, 05/23/19 and 06/14 /19, Edmilson Rodrigues (PSOL – PA) on 02/20/19 , Camilo Capiberibe (PSB – AP) on 05/23/2019 , Friar Anastacio Ribeiro (PT – PB), Catholic, on 05/23/19 and Sâmia Bomfim (PSOL – SP), on 06/17/19.

<sup>14</sup> These congresspeople spoke against the judicial activism of the STF regarding the themes of abortion or sexual diversity and against the criminalization of homophobia: Eli Borges 02/14/19, 04/25/19, 06/14/2019, 06/17/19, Bia Kicis (PSL – DF) on 02/14/19, Filipe Barros (PSL – PR, evangelical, Presbyterian) 02/13 2/19, Sóstenes Cavalcante (DEM-RJ, evangelical Assembly of God), Aroldo Martins (PRB – PR, evangelical IURD) 02/25/19, Otoni de Paula (PSC – RJ) on 02/12/19, 02/19/19 and 02/21/19. Deputy Fábio Trad (PSD – MS) took a stand on 02/21/19 in favor of the criminalization of homophobia, but by the Legislative Power. Regarding abortion: Eli Borges (SD – TO) on 04/25/19, Sóstenes Cavalcante (02/19/19), Otoni de Paula (PSC – RJ) on 05/14/19. Sometimes the speeches referred to both topics, as was the case with Deputy Chris Tonietto (PSL – RJ), on 7/4/2019. Against the judicial activism of the STF 06/5/19, Eli Borges (SD – TO).

## Propositions favorable to sexual diversity

Many pro-diversity propositions were also defended on the floor of Congress, a significant part of which dealt with discrimination.

Some legislative proposals addressed discrimination within the State, such as those presented in the table below. Of these, two propositions aimed at questioning or ceasing policies implemented by the Bolsonaro government (in the National Council to Combat Discrimination -- CNCD -- and the Ministry of Tourism), while the third aimed to curb discrimination by public health and safety bodies.

**Table 3** - Legislative proposals against discrimination within the scope of the State (2019)

<b>Congressperson</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Legislative proposal</b>	<b>Subject of the proposal</b>
David Miranda	PSOL - RJ	Draft Legislative Decree No. 487/2019	Suspends Decree No. 9,883, of June 27th, 2019, which provides for the National Council to Combat Discrimination.
Marcelo Calero	CITIZENSHIP - RJ	Information Request No. 732/2019	Requests information regarding the non-inclusion of the LGBT+ public in the National Tourism Plan guidelines of 2018-2022, approved by Decree No. 9791, of May 14, 2019.
Maria do Rosário	PT - RS	Bill No. 3774/2019	Establishes rules and criteria for recording criminal and administrative offenses that may be motivated by prejudice or discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression by public safety and health agencies in national territory.
Luizianne Lins	PT - CE	Application No. 55/2019	Requires holding a Public Hearing to discuss censorship against LGBT cultural expressions

Source: Chamber of Deputies Internet Portal

There were also initiatives to incorporate discrimination against LGBT in Brazil's racism law, shown in the table below. These include a request by Erika Kokay and two bills by Luiz Flávio Gomes. In addition to these, Expedito Neto, Marília Arraes, Edna Henrique and David Miranda authored different bills aimed at combating discrimination, as well as a policy project to combat discrimination in schools, authored by PSOL deputies David Miranda (RJ), Fernanda Melchionna (RS) and Sâmia Bomfim (SP).

**Table 4** - Legislative proposals to combat LGBT discrimination (2019)

<b>Congressperson</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Legislative proposal</b>	<b>Subject of the proposal</b>
Erika Kokay	PT - DF	Application No. 30/2019	Requires the holding of a public hearing, in conjunction with the Human Rights and Minorities Commission, to discuss PL No. 2,138/2015, which "Amends Law No. 7,716/1989, to punish discrimination or prejudice regarding gender identity or sexual orientation .
Luiz Flavio Gomes	PSB - SP	Bill No. 1051/2019	Amends Law 7,716/1989, which defines crimes resulting from racial or color prejudice, to include sexual orientation.
Luiz Flavio Gomes	PSB - SP	Bill No. 2057/2019	Amends Law 7,716/1989, which defines crimes resulting from racial or color prejudice, to include sexual orientation and gender identity.
Expedited Netto	PSD - RO	Bill No. 4468/2019	Amends art. 65 of Law nº 9.605/1998, to insert a qualifier in the crime of graffiti.
Marília Arraes	PT - PE	Bill No. 713/2019.	Amends art. 61 of the Penal Code to consider as an aggravating factor race, color, ethnicity, religion, origin, sexual orientation, gender and/or disability in the commission of a crime.
Edna Henrique	PSDB - PB	Bill No. 321/2019	Prohibits discriminatory practices for admission, promotion or permanence in employment.
David Miranda	PSOL - RJ	Bill No. 2653/2019	Provides for the protection of people in situations of violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or biological or sexual characteristics.
David Miranda; Fernanda Melchionna; Sâmia Bomfim	PSOL - RJ PSOL - RS PSOL - SP	Bill No. 3741/2019.	Creates the School without Discrimination Program to combat violence against the LGBT population.
Talíria Petrone	PSOL - RJ	Bill No. 2777/2019	Establishes the need to collect, process data, and create statistics on the LGBT population in health, social assistance, and public safety services

Source: Chamber of Deputies Internet Portal

Finally, there was a proposal by Deputy Talíria Petrone aimed at increasing the collection of information about the sexually diverse segments of the Brazilian population, which could inform future public policies.

Proposals also served to hold commemorative events: for example, seven requests from twelve different congresspeople to hold the XVI LGBTQI+ Seminar of the National Congress<sup>15</sup>. Another, signed by fifteen deputies, was hold a Solemn Session in Congress to mark the *50th anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising* and honor personalities who have stood out in the fight for LGBT rights.<sup>16</sup>

## Speeches in the second half of 2019

In the second half of 2019, the discursive dynamic continued, with the mention of abortion and sexual diversity in speeches against the left and in defense of the government.

### Criticism of the left

Accusations sought to mark the contrast between the government's supporters (and the president's party) and the left and the LGBT movement, as is well illustrated by a speech given on 8/8/19 by Luiz Ovando (PSL – MS), Baptist evangelical:

What the Left needs to learn from the PSL is that we are the defenders and helpers of the perpetuation of life. Not the Left. Why? Because it defends abortion, it defends gender ideology, which is nothing more than thanatoideology, which is sterile and does not allow for the renewal of life.

Continuing, Ovando says he is a defender of sexual choice and disqualifies the work of the left in defense of the environment, because the human species is threatened by this:

I respect everyone's sexual orientation, but I didn't come here simply to defend life, using the issue of the environment, when, in fact, the biggest problem we face is the threat to the human race. This is happening precisely because of the dissemination and imposition of the unfortunate situation of making our children affected by gender ideology. This is thanatoideology .

On 9/5/19, Deputy Caroline de Toni (PSL – SC), a spiritist, gave a speech repudiating of the representation filed by the Federal Attorney's Office against Minister Damares Alves, accusing the Deputy Attorney General for Citizens' Rights, Deborah Duprat, of being a "progressive militant" and leader of the movements for the liberation of abortion and marijuana.

### Criticism of the LGBT movement

Criticism of the left was added to criticism of the LGBT movement. It is important here that such criticism disqualified only the movement and not individual subjects, an attitude observed by Cesarino (2019). The discursive dynamic against the left was like that employed against the LGBT movement in terms of being declaring difference and reversing accusations.

15 Alice Portugal (PCdoB – BA) Application No. 55/2019; Luiza Erundina (PSOL/SP) and Glauber Braga (PSOL – RJ) Application No. 21/2019; Lídice da Mata (PSB – BA) and Marcelo Freixo (PSOL – RJ) Application No. 35/2019; PSOL trio Edmilson Rodrigues (PA), Glauber Braga (RJ) and Ivan Valente (SP) Application No. 117/2019; Erika Kokay (PT-DF) Application No. 43/2019; PSOL duo Sâmia Bomfim (SP) and Fernanda Melchionna (RS) Application No. 28/2019; another PSOL duo David Miranda (RJ) and **Áurea** Carolina (MG) Application No. 32/2019;

16 Authors include parliamentarians David Miranda, Ivan Valente, Luiza Erundina, Glauber Braga, Áurea Carolina, Talíria Petrone, Edmilson Rodrigues, Fernanda Melchionna, Marcelo Freixo, Sâmia Bomfim (PSOL), Erika Kokay, Maria do Rosário (PT), Túlio Gadelha (PDT), Tereza Nelma (PSD), Christiane Yared (PR), which includes parties of the left, center-left, center and right, with the predominance of the left .

Thus, Bibó Nunes (PSL – RS), on 1/10/19, claimed that those “*who preach hatred between the classes, between white and black, between short and fat, between rich and poor, between heterosexual and homosexual - is the left*”. The following day (2/10), Bibó Nunes (PSL – RS) took up his criticisms once again:

I do not accept an opposition deputy coming here to say that Bolsonaro’s party is the party of hate, the government of hate. Those who used hatred in this country were the left, based on Lenin’s decalogue: “we are going to end society and youth, we are going to preach the class struggle, the poor against the rich, the homosexual against the heterosexual, the skinny against the fat”. Those who employ hate are the left. If it’s for the love of country, Bolsonaro employs it.

On 10/9/19, in a speech criticizing Preta Gil for not singing without a fee at an LGBT event, Otoni de Paula (PSC – RJ) declared that: “*the homosexual citizen needs to understand, once and for all, that the LGBTI movement is a political movement, created with public money, and that it does not represent the good citizen who is homosexual*”.

On 11/28/2019, Otoni de Paula (PSC – RJ) also stated that the mainstream media sponsors of the LGBT movement:

Unfortunately, [...] the LGBT Movement does not represent the homosexual citizen. It is, in fact, a political movement that aims to deconstruct heteronormativity and the values of the Judeo-Christian culture. To do this, it directly attacks our children and adolescents within the schools and uses the media, or part of it, to construct fallacious data on the persecution and genocide of homosexuals in the national territory, as if this were a country that kills homosexuals.

Curiously, this speech uses the vocabulary of gender studies -- “heteronormativity” -- within the logic of the cultural wars (Natividade and Oliveira, 2016) to claim that “the values of the Judeo-Christian culture” are being deconstructed. He also claims that one of the main arguments of the LGBT movement -- denouncing the deaths of LGBT people -- is based on fallacious data.

## The anti-gender perspective

The so-called fight against gender ideology was one of the most important themes during this period, associated with the school environment, the protection of children, and the defense of the family:

On 09/03/19, there was a debate between deputies about “fake news” aimed at the Fortaleza, Ceará city government. According to a document released on video, Fortaleza was supposedly training teachers to teach “gender ideology”, in the form of the eroticization of children in schools. The city government of Fortaleza denied the claim and exposed the video as a montage<sup>17</sup>. This was the trigger for a sequence of discourses on gender ideology within Congress.

Eli Borges (SD – TO) returned to this theme on the same day but targeting day care centers and schools. According to Borges, “*gender ideologues*” use children in their cognitive phase to imprint their ideology. Borges illustrates how the eroticization of children is taught in schools: “*they put little children, still tiny, into the bathtub and tell the little girl that she has the padlock and that, the little boy has the little key to the padlock.*”

Without citing “fake news”, Bibó Nunes (PSL – RS) then spoke against gender ideology: “*We are totally against gender ideology. Making a 4, 5 or 6-year-old child choose their gender is an aberration.*”

<sup>17</sup> Available at: <https://diariodonordeste.verdesmares.com.br/metro/prefeitura-desmente-video-sobre-suposto-treinamento-de-educacao-sexual-para-criancas-em-fortaleza-1.2144261>. Accessed on: 07/14/19.



Also on 09/03/19, Pastor Sargento Isidório (AVANTE – BA) gave a speech about the devaluation of bus drivers and fare collectors in Bahia, but he soon changed his theme. With the debate about gender ideology taking place in the plenary, Isidório directed his speech to President Jair Bolsonaro, regarding the Deputy's Projeto de Lei N° 1239/19:

Regarding gender ideology, I want to tell President Jair Bolsonaro that he can look at my project in this House that prohibits the use of municipal, state, and federal public resources to deceive our children, by telling the boy that he can be a girl and the girl that she can be a boy. This is a big mistake. God created male and female. Male and female the Lord God created and blessed them. A man with a man does not make a child. Woman with woman doesn't make children either.

It is noticed that these three discourses repeat the accusation of early sexualization and of inducing changes in gender identity. The opposition to gender ideology involves the repetition of supposed risks to childhood and the family (Teixeira and Biroli, 2022). Pastor Sergeant Isidório employed religious language to make these claims, a rhetorical inclination presented in several pronouncements.

### The Defense of the heteronormative family

Although the theme of the family appeared on different occasions, it is worth mentioning here the mobilization that occurred around a bill presented by a Deputy from the left. Projeto de Lei 3369/15 by Deputy Orlando Silva (PCdoB-SP) attempted to institute the Statute of 21st Century Families. The project was being processed by the Commission on Human and Minority Rights,<sup>18</sup> but became the subject of debate in the plenary on 08/20/2019.

On 08/20/19, Captain Augusto (PL – SP) gave a speech criticizing the bill. According to the Deputy, *“This project induces the freedom, for the new family of the 21st century, for marriage between parents and children and marriage between siblings, in addition to marriage between a person and several women, so-called ‘polyamory’”*. Calling the bill an aberration, Augusto requested that the left respect Congress, as the project *“completely disrespects the Brazilian family, Christianity -- which is still the majority in this country – [and] good men and women”*. According to the Deputy, the Bill was such an affront that it *“reminds us of the days of the gay kit”*.

Aroldo Martins, evangelical (Republicanos– PR), on 08/20/19, also spoke about the Bill. *“In the name of a country of the 21st century”*, he claimed the bill sought to mock the *“sacred family, which was instituted by God, to mock and try to legalize any type of union, including what we all know as incestuous relationships”*.

Eli Borges (SD – TO) also criticized Bill No. 3369/15 on 08/20/19: *“And here an open family model is proposed. It is not possible to effectively convince me that incest is not implicit here, even if indirectly”*. Finally, he requests that the author of the bill remove it from the agenda and write a more specific text, *“because this opening will bring to light a model of family that is extremely affronting to the true family of science, of biology - and I quote the Bible - of creation as it is inscribed in the Holy Book”*.

It is important to emphasize here the content of the discourse, because, in addition to accusations of a moral nature regarding incest, it puts Science (Biology in this case) and the Bible on the same foot in defining the family, a posture characteristic of religious fundamentalisms that recurrently appears in the course of my research (Luna, 2017; Luna, 2019) and which also appears in the discourse of the Catholic magisterium, when combating the gender perspective, on the place of women (Machado, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> According to the procedure form available on the Portal of the Chamber of Deputies, available at: <https://www.camara.leg.br/proposicoesWeb/fichade-tramitacao?idProposicao=2024195>. Accessed on 7/6/2022.

Other questions were based on the supposedly majority conservative disposition of Brazilian society of the Christian religion. On 08/20/19, Marcos Feliciano (PODE – SP), evangelical and pastor of the Assembly of God, asked:

How is it that in a country where 88% of people openly declare themselves to be Christian, in a country where conservatism is today rampant, a deputy from the Communist Party of Brazil presents a project trying to legalize polygamy and incest? This is making fun of the Brazilian people. It is making fun of us Christians.

On 08/20/19, Milton Vieira (Republicanos – SP), evangelical (IURD), accused the bill of “assaulting the Brazilian family”. The pronouncement of Deputy David Soares (DEM – SP), evangelical (Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus), on 08/20/19, presented the family as historically immutable: “[this is] the family of all centuries, because that is how we reproduce: man and woman come together and produce a child”. On the same day, Deputy Roberto Alves (Republicanos – SP), evangelical (IURD), also spoke against the bill, stating that it “legalizes polygamy and incest”. After stating that it is written in the Bible that “God created the family”, Pastor Sargento Isidório declared that Deputies “will not lower themselves to call a sexual group a family” and stated that, in the future, the proponents of the bill would want to include zoophiliac arrangements as a family. Finally, Alves pointed out that Brazil is a Christian country and that the family cannot be offended in a way which would transform the country into a “true whorehouse”.

On 08/20/19, Deputy Orlando Silva (PCdoB – SP) countered the criticisms of his bill. Silva described the accusation that he was trying to legalize incest in Brazil as untrue and “fake news”, which sought to use “social networks in search of likes, seeking -- who knows -- to attack a leftist party, to undermine political leadership”. Regarding his bill, Silva claimed:

[...] At the present time, we must recognize all relationships based on affection, on love, without distinction of sexual orientation, respecting homoaffection ties. When I referred in the text to blood relations, this refers to adoption. It is revolting to watch a Member of Parliament insinuate that this proposes to legalize incest, which is a secular taboo, based on all religions and civilizations known to humanity.

The following day, on 08/21/19, Alex Santana (PDT – BA), evangelical (Assembleia de Deus), took up the theme once again and stressed the importance of the Bill being withdrawn from the Chamber’s agenda: “We are attentive to everything that is happening here in this House that may hurt the traditional family, not relying solely on religious feeling, but on a feeling of natural protection of the family”. The defense of the family is imbued here with a religious vision of reproducing Christian values that it is the mission of these deputies, almost all of whom have a public Christian religious identity (Evangelicals and Catholics) to defend, a point also identified by Barros, Bernardes and Pinto (2018).

## Against the Supreme Court (judicial activism)

One of the moments in which the discursive disputes that constitute the State became evident and went beyond the debate in the Legislature were the accusation of judicial activism leveled against the Federal Supreme Court. In the second half of 2019, several Deputies spoke up against the STF, accusing the court of judicial activism. Dr. Jaziel (PL - CE), evangelical (Assembleia de Deus) spoke twice on the subject -- once on 08/8/2019 and again on 09/10/2019 -- in speeches criticizing ADO 26 (which equated homophobia with the crime of racism). In his second pronouncement, Jaziel mentioned two bills:

In an effort to try to curb the STF's activist impulse, we presented Projeto de Lei nº 4.370 of 2019, which determines compliance with the principle of legal reserve in criminal law; that is, that the State ceases to apply penalties without a prior legal definition of the crime. In different directions, there are other measures that have my support, as these try to bring back institutional balance and the value of popular suffrage. For example, Projeto de Lei nº 4.754 of 2016, authored by Deputy Sóstenes Cavalcante and others, whose objective is to typify as a crime the usurpation of competence of the rights of the other Powers by the Ministers of the STF.

This Deputy wanted to restrict the STF in usurping Congress' role by defining penalties without having previously defined a crime (the case of equating homophobia with racism). Jaziel also spoke against the judicial activism of the STF. On 10/3/19, Chris Tonietto (PSL – RJ) called on Congress to “react” and fight against judicial activism. The Deputy cited ADPF 54 (dealong with abortion in case of anencephaly), ADPF 442 (voluntary abortion) and ADI 5581 (referring abortion in cases where the mother had been exposed to the Zika virus), in addition to ADO 26.

Recently, we [saw the Court take up] the case of homophobia, under the allegation that we [Congress] had not made propositions in this direction. Now, thank God, they've removed the liberation of drugs from the agenda, but that doesn't mean they won't debate this issue again. They also want to legislate on abortion.

The controversy over judicial activism by the STF was taken up again on 10/29/19 by Deputy Otoni de Paula (PSC – RJ), who stated that the STF was usurping Congresses' power by legislating on a topic specific to the Legislative Branch, citing the criminalization of LGBTphobia and ADPF N° 442 which judges upon the decriminalization of abortion in Brazil. The complaint against the STF came precisely in the midst of the sequence of decisions that went against conservative guidelines; decisions that were touched upon by the deputies in their speeches, as seen above.

## Criticism of cultural production

Another highlight is the war that was waged in the area of cultural production. The largest number of speeches in this respect was given by deputy Otoni de Paula (pastor of the Assembly of God).

The Bienal do Livro (Book Bienal) episode was the subject of several speeches. In this, Mayor Marcelo Crivella ordered the removal from the event of a Marvel Comic depicting a gay kiss between two male characters. Otoni de Paula (PSC – RJ) spoke about this on 09/10/19. According to him, the removal was not about prejudice or “discrimination against a homosexual citizen, but [it was defending against] an attack on an ancient culture on which our society is formed, which is the heteronormative culture”. In his words, homosexuality has always existed and will exist, but what happens today is “an ideological war led by gay culture, created and invented by the LGBT movement”. On the same day, in speeches in solidarity with Mayor Marcelo Crivella, Sóstenes Cavalcante, (DEM – RJ), evangelical from the Assembly of God, and Jorge Braz (REPUBLICANS – RJ), evangelical (IURD). Pastor Eurico (PATRIOTA – PE) spoke out, declaring that the Bienal “*must be rejected for disrespecting our children. This dirty game by the homosexual movement is disrespectful to our children.*” Finally, on 09/26/19, Otoni de Paula (PSC – RJ) announced he was forwarding of a motion to repudiate the nomination of Youtuber Felipe Neto as a recipient of the Legislative Merit Medal in the Chamber of Deputies, for his protests during the Book Biennial:

So what did Felipe Neto do? Distributed 14,000 books talking about homosexuality for children. Instead of having the age group warning clearly listed on the book, this was written in a mocking tone: ‘This book is inappropriate for backward, retrograde, and prejudiced people’. He thus insultingly despised the diversity of ideas and thoughts that he himself claims to defend.

Again the inversion of arguments appears here, with the other side accused of being intolerant.

The most mentioned subject in 2019 regarding culture was the criticism of the Christmas special made by Grupo Porta dos Fundos and broadcast on Netflix. On 12/9/19, Eli Borges (SD – TO) repudiated Netflix and the Porta dos Fundos channel for making a Christmas special portraying a homosexual Jesus and drunken disciples during the Holy Supper. On the same day, speeches were given by Gilberto Nascimento (PSC – SP) and Pastor Sargento Isidório. The following day, on 12/10/19, Pastor Sargento Isidório (Avante – BA) leveled new criticisms: with regards to Netflix, the streaming service responsible for distributing the film, he said that it distributed a film about “homosexuality” that makes youth sick and that the duty of the media is “to care for social and religious peace and for our children, adolescents, and young people who are still forming their character and who need to preserve the good customs of the Brazilian family”. Finally, the congressman criticized homosexuality: “*A man with a man makes a werewolf, a woman with a woman makes an alligator. A man with a man does not make a child. Woman with woman doesn’t make children either. This would be the extermination of our generation*”. On 12/10/19, Otoni de Paula (PSC – RJ) stated that the left-wing demonstrations against Christianity had grown and that Netflix was sponsoring “*aberrations against the Christian faith*”, because they know that “*the Christ they offend always taught love, and perhaps none of his followers will rise up and attack them [Netflix]*”. Paula challenged Netflix to make a film with a gay Mohammed or Allah. On 12/10/19, Sóstenes Cavalcante (DEM – RJ), repudiated Netflix and announced that he would sue the company in the Judiciary for religious vilification. On 12/12/19, Otoni de Paula (PSC – RJ) took up the theme again, claiming Netflix had offended 80% of Christians. On 12/17/19, Julio Cesar Ribeiro (Republicanos – DF), evangelical (IURD), spoke about the approval of the request to summon a representative of Netflix and Porta dos Fundos into Congress to clarify the film “The First Temptation of Christ”. On 12/17/19, Bibó Nunes (PSL – RS) also protested against Netflix.

On 12/18/19, Eduardo Bolsonaro (PSL – SP) took to the podium to assert the need for the political right to appropriate the cultural agenda in politics. The first step taken in this direction was the nomination of Abraham Weintraub as Minister of Education. Weintraub’s purpose was to stop “gender ideology” and put civic-military schools into operation. In addition, Bolsonaro stressed that under Weintraub’s management, ENEM would carry out high-quality college entrance exams without ideologization. Weintraub mentioned that, in the past, ENEM had cited feminism and the “transvestite dictionary”. According to him, “for the first time, we will have a test that’s, let’s say, normal”. The Deputy also stated that the right cannot make the same mistake as the “military regime”, when “there was an economic miracle”, but the cultural agenda was forgotten, allowing “gramscist ideology” to take over universities and form political militants.

It is important to highlight here the fact that this particular Deputy is President Bolsonaro’s son and that his speech showed a broader conception of the cultural agenda as a government project, including the performance of the then Minister of Education Weintraub. Criticism of cultural production as offensive to religion represents one of the facets of the minority process analyzed by Burity (2016), in which Christians place themselves as a minority threatened by secularist attacks. It is one of the moments that pop up in discursive disputes in which the inversion of accusations occurs most often, given the accusation of intolerance and the comparison with the supposed “respect” shown for other religions, such as Islam.

## Accusation of LGBT movement privilege

Another constant item in the repertoire of conservative speeches was the accusation that the LGBT movement sought privileges and the promotion of differentiated form of citizenship. On 10/15/19, there was a vote on amendment No. 72 of Medida Provisória N°886/19, which provided for the organization of the Presidency of the Republic and the Ministries. The amendment included as a guideline the promotion of LGBT rights. Deputy Arthur Oliveira Maia (DEM – BA) understood the amendment to be discriminatory for

specifying the rights of only part of the population instead of the entire population. On the same day, Otoni de Paula (PSC – RJ) also spoke about the amendment. He stated that it was an attempt by the PT (Workers' Party) to include the LGBT population in the guidelines of the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights. After criticizing the LGBT movement for not representing individuals, who would supposedly be respected by the government, he says that this measure “will not establish first-class citizenship in this country”. On the same day, Pastor Sergeant Isidório (AVANTE – BA) made a speech on behalf of his party, using the Bible:

Avante understands that it is widely written in the Bible that God created male and female; male and female the Lord God created and blessed, and we have an obligation to respect every citizen, regardless of what they fantasize about doing with his gender. But when a child is born, their identity already comes between their legs. God created male and female, male and female. All are equal before the law. Gays and lesbians are all accepted by Criminal and Constitutional Law; they are citizens with the right to education, health, employment, income; and we cannot turn them into gods. The way things are going, soon we heterosexuals - the family of one man plus a woman equals a child - will have to lower our heads for them to pass. We want respect.

In addition to denouncing the supposed privilege of gays and lesbians who were above equality before the law, the observation “we cannot turn them into gods” shows the speech mixing religious and legal language, to contradictorily assert respect for the individual and equality before the law while at the same time demanding respect for the heterosexual family, which should not have to lower its head. While defending equality, Isidório's discourse pushes LGBT people to know their place and stay there.

On 10/22/19, Otoni de Paula took to the podium to denounce what he calls the “*gay dictatorship*” or “*gayzism*”. The deputy reported that a text posted on his social network was deleted due to the mass denunciation of members of the LGBT movement in its comments section<sup>19</sup>: “*This ‘gayzism’, this gay dictatorship that searches us out and makes us hostages on social networks, needs to end, because we live in a Democratic State of Law.*”

## Religious expression and accusations of Christophobia

With regard to religious expressions, in addition to the quotations from the Bible made by some congresspeople, more frequently by Pastor Sergeant Isidório but also by Otoni de Paula (also a pastor), the denunciation of persecution of Christians often pops up. On 12/10/19, Otoni de Paula (PSC – RJ) took to the podium with an image of Our Lady and a Bible, highlighting the importance of these symbols for the Christian faith and stating that the “Christophobic left” had already used these symbols for *its manifestations*. Similarly, Otoni de Paula stated, speaking about the Porta dos Fundos video on 12/12/19, that if the film were a satire of African-derived religions, the left would be “*belligerent, crazy, shouting, and screaming*”. The left did not do this when the Christian faith was offended because “*the left has chosen Christianity as its enemy*”. By placing themselves in the position of the victim, or of a persecuted minority, these congresspeople mimic the discourse of denouncing religious intolerance, ironically comparing the defense of their beliefs with the defense of religions of African origin, which was supposedly a leftist position. Here again, we see the discursive dynamics of the inversion of accusations.

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<sup>19</sup> In the policies of social networks -- such as Twitter and Facebook --, texts, photos, and comments can be deleted by moderators if they receive complaints and are considered intolerant or hate speech.

## Criticism of the Bolsonaro government: the left strikes back

Disputes also involved the opposing camp. A significant part of the references to the themes of abortion and sexual diversity were made in pronouncements criticizing the government without actually debating the themes, being authored by congresspeople from leftist parties. These were most often accusations against the government and against the president. In his speech on 08/6/19 Gervásio Maia (PSB – PB) disapproved of Jair Bolsonaro as “*prejudiced, homophobic and with speech full of hate*”, saying that “*he sent a message to the Northeast*”. Ivan Valente (PSOL – SP) criticized Jair Bolsonaro’s growing authoritarianism on 8/7/19, as “*defending machismo, racism, homophobia, violence, torture, and dictatorship!*”. Erika Kokay (PT-DF) also criticized the Bolsonaro government on 08/15/19, stating it “*forgets the wounds on the bodies of the Brazilian people, women, the LGBT population, and blacks*”. On 08/20/19, Kokay declared: “*this Government has deepened inequalities in this country, because it makes a Brazil where the Brazilian people do not fit; because it makes a Brazil where violence against women, against the poor, against the LGBT population is naturalized.*” Erika Kokay (PT – DF) also said, on 08/28/2019, that the Bolsonaro government was “*misogynistic, LGBT-phobic, racist, and says that the problem in Brazil is the indigenous peoples*”. In addition, on 09/10/19, Leônidas Cristino (PDT – CE) made a short speech criticizing the Bolsonaro government in the area of national education: “*Instead of valuing the teacher, we see them fighting against gender ideology and [promoting] the foolishness of the Escola Sem Partido project*”.

Some speeches reacted to the execution of government public policies, such as in the area of culture. On 08/20/19, Edmilson Rodrigues (PSOL – PA) criticized the Ministry of Citizenship and President Jair Bolsonaro for attacks on the National Film Agency (ANCINE). He repudiated the suspension of a public notice for financing audiovisual content focused on gender diversity and sexuality.<sup>20</sup> On 10/7/19, the Federal Court of Rio de Janeiro determined the suspension of the ordinance that interrupted the notice. Deputy Áurea Carolina (PSOL – MG) celebrated this feat the following day, on 10/8/19. Denouncing discrimination by the State, on 10/15/19, Edmilson Rodrigues (PSOL – SP) offered solidarity to directors and artists who had their projects barred due to ideological conflicts with the government. Among these, the Deputy mentioned the company “*Dos à Deux*”, which had their show with a *travestí* character barred.

## Denouncement of violence and discrimination against LGBT in State policies

On 10/15/19, Medida Provisória N° 886/19 was voted on, providing for the organization of the Presidency of the Republic and the Ministries. The MPV was the subject of criticism by left-wing Deputies for several reasons, but mainly because it was considered as exclusionary to the LGBT population. Friar Anastacio Ribeiro (PT – PB) made a brief speech against government monitoring of councils. Anastacio Ribeiro stated that the government wants the councils for the rights of women, blacks, and LGBT people “*to be under its feet*”. Maria do Rosário (PT – RS) criticized the proposal, claiming that “*the Government intends to create a system not of monitoring, but of policing civil society organizations*” by creating “*an inspection mechanism, under the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic, to monitor NGOs*”. Regarding the LGBT population, she protested against the non-inclusion of LGBT rights in the human rights secretariat. Hours later, Maria do Rosário returned to the podium to make new criticisms of the MPV, stating that the Bolsonaro Government goal with the measure to “*remove the right of recognition of gay, lesbian, transsexual, and transgender people*”. Talíria Petrone (PSOL – RJ) stated that it was a measure contrary to diversity: “*It is impossible to think of a restructuring of the Ministry of Human Rights while denying the need for this Ministry to recognize that Brazil is the country that most murders transsexual people and travestís and does not recognize them; that there is still the murder and rape of lesbian women; and that the right of gays and bisexuals to love is denied*”. The amendment was also criticized by Deputy Alice Portugal (PCdoB – BA).

<sup>20</sup> Available at: <https://www.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrada/2019/08/edital-com-series-lgbt-criticadas-por-bolsonaro-em-live-e-suspenso.shtml>. Accessed on: 05/14/2020.

At the end of her speech, she mentions the LGBT population, and concludes: “it [the text of the provisional measure] deepens exclusion and inequality, rejects populations, rejects the LGBT population, and appropriates, for a group of enlightened people, the possibility of deciding the future of the Brazilian State”. Deputy Sâmia Bomfim (PSOL – SP) stated that the amendment corrects the atrocities committed by the government by removing the LGBT population from the remit of the Ministry of Human Rights. The Deputy declared that it was necessary to specify the promotion of the rights of this population, as

We are talking about a trans population that has a life expectancy of 36 years in our country; we are talking about the country that most kills and most subjects to the LGBT population to violence; we are talking about people who are expelled from home, are expelled from school, and who even have very little representation in this Parliament, which is the result of discrimination and “LGBTphobia”, so present in our society.

Regarding the amendment and in response to Deputy Otoni de Paula, Maria do Rosário highlighted that the PT was not trying to *include* the LGBT agenda, the rights of this group were already included and the Bolsonaro Government was trying to remove them. In addition, she stressed that not specifying the promotion of the rights of this population meant ignoring the citizenship of the LGBT population.

### Defense of sexual diversity and the gender perspective

There was also a reaction to the comic censored at the Book Biennial for containing gay kisses and the outrage over support for Youtuber Filipe Neto. This was the subject of a speech by David Miranda (PSOL – RJ) on 09/10/2019. The Deputy announced the filing of a suit against Marcelo Crivella (Mayor of Rio de Janeiro) for censoring the comic book. On the same day, Jandira Feghali (PCdoB – RJ) also spoke out on the subject, more specifically in defending Youtuber Felipe Neto, who was criticized in the Chamber due to his distribution of books regarding LGBT issues. Also speaking out on that same day were Fernanda Melchionna (PSOL – RS) and Valmir Assunção (PT – BA). On 09/10/19, Crivella’s attitude was also criticized by Deputy Ivan Valente (PSOL – SP), who extended his criticism to the Mayor of São Paulo, João Dória, stating that the two mayors represented today’s Brazil, where “torturers are praised, censorship is carried out and democracy is destroyed”. In the case of João Dória, Miranda denounced the mayor’s order to collect science handouts that discussed sexual and gender diversity.

Speeches were given defending against accusations, mainly with respect to gender ideology. On 09/03/19, André Figueiredo (PDT – CE) gave a speech in response to Eli Borges (SD - TO), who used fake news to accuse the City of Fortaleza of promoting the eroticization of children, suggesting that the Borges was reinforcing this fake news in order to contribute to the demonization of so-called “gender ideology”. On the same day, Talíria Petrone (PSOL – RJ) cited the persecution of gender and sexuality studies as a critical restriction of Brazilian education: “Wanting to prohibit what they call ‘gender ideology’ in school is preventing schools from being an instrument to break the extreme sexual violence that victimizes many adolescents -- violence that comes from the family itself”. Jandira Feghali (PCdoB – RJ) also spoke on the same day, explaining that “gender ideology” is not on the agenda of the left or feminism, that it was, instead, an accusatory term contrary to gender studies and debates.

## Defense of the LGBT population and rights

Some speeches denounced the problems of LGBT people. On 09/10/19, Iracema Portella (PP – PI) spoke about the launch of a monitoring tool for Laws and Policies related to AIDS by the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS – UNAIDS. In its description, the “*site that presents information on several areas, [...] such as the existence of laws that discriminate against transgender people*”. This was a rare pro-diversity comment made by a Congressperson from a party outside the left.

On 10/29/19, David Miranda (PSOL – RJ) drew attention to the importance of Lei nº 8.833/17, which typifies as a crime inducing children and adolescents to commit suicide and self-mutilation, emphasizing that the bullying suffered by LGBT youth increases their chances of committing suicide and that most of this happens at school.

Considering the pro-diversity speeches, the vast majority of these used the theme to criticize the current government for being misogynistic, homophobic, for wanting to take away rights, for revoking policies, and for making this sexual minority invisible. There were reactive discourses against fallacious concepts like “gender ideology” and also discourses explaining concepts. Few speeches mentioned measures or rights: they consisted mainly of generic denunciations referring to the higher number of deaths and incidents of violence suffered by LGBT people, but most of the discourses did not go into specific cases.

There was also a dynamic of accusation. Government supporters accused the left of creating divisions. They accused movements of demanding privileges. They admitted that individual subjects should not be discriminated against, but they accused the LGBT movement of misrepresenting their cause. They criticized the left for its immorality, accusing it of defending abortion, sexualizing children (gender ideology), promoting drugs, destroying the family, and being against the Christian religion (with accusations of Christophobia and against cultural manifestations such as the Porta dos Fundos video) .

## Legislative proposals

### The defense of religious freedom

Discursive disputes also occurred through legislative proposals.

A proposal worthy of mention here is that of Deputy Otoni de Paula (PSC – RJ/Evangélico), who, with a view of heading off the equation of LGBTphobia with the crime of racism by the STF, created Projeto de Lei Nº 4949/19. The purpose of this bill was to qualify crimes resulting from discrimination based on sex or sexual orientation, while excluding intolerance based on individual freedom of belief. In Paula’s justification, he stated that the STF’s decision attacked the right to religious manifestations, and that it was necessary to “*protect this right*”, even to the extent of protecting the right of businessmen or traders to stop providing services to homosexuals or transsexuals.

It is notable that Otoni’s proposition safeguarded the right to discrimination and intolerance, a point we will develop further below.

Several proposals were mobilized along these lines.



**Table 5** - Legislative proposals against LGBT rights (2019)

<b>Congressperson</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Legislative Proposal</b>	<b>Subject Of The Proposal</b>
Sóstenes Cavalcante	DEM - RJ	Application No. 173/19	Requires holding a Public Hearing to hear the testimony of people who stopped being gay and discuss their position and the problems faced, from then on, in society.
Abilio Santana	PL - BA	Application No. 154/19	<i>I request that a public hearing be held to discuss the prejudice suffered by former homosexuals, a minority within a minority.</i>
Pastor Eurico	PATRIOT - PE	Bill No. 5490/19	Repeals item “i” of item IV of § 3 of art. 3 of Law No. 11,350/06, which provides for Community Health Agents to carry out home visits to homosexuals and transsexuals.
Otoni de Paula	PSC - RJ	Bill No. 4949/19	Amends Law No. 7,716/1989, to define and punish crimes resulting from discrimination or prejudice based on sex or sexual orientation, but does not criminalize conduct based on individual freedom of belief.
Dr. Jaziel	PL - EC	Draft Legislative Decree No. 520/19	Suspends the application of Resolution No. 1/18, of the National Council of Education, which defines the use of the social name of transsexuals and <i>travestis</i> for official use in school records.

Source: Chamber of Deputies Internet Portal

These proposals were contrary to sexual diversity and defended the figure of repentant homosexuals as victims of discrimination. They also sought to eliminate the rights of LGBT people through their non-recognition (defining them as biologically men and women with regard to health policies) and the prohibition of the use of social names in schools. The proposals also used the argument of individual freedom to ensure that discriminatory actions would go unpunished.

#### Pro-diversity and anti-discrimination proposals

On the other hand, there were several proposals that identified with the cause of diversity, promoting public policies to protect or combat discrimination.

**Table 6** - Legislative proposals for public policies to protect LGBT (2019)

Congressperson	Party	Legislative Proposal	Subject Of The Proposal
Marcelo Freixo	PSOL - RJ	Bill No. 6350/19	Amends the Penal Execution Law to determine that <i>travestis</i> and transsexuals are taken to the appropriate establishment for their gender identity.
David Miranda	PSOL - RJ	Bill No. 5096/19	Establishes, within the scope of the National Policy for the Prevention of Self-Mutilation and Suicide, clippings and content aimed at the LGBTI+ population.
Bacellar	CAN - BA	Bill No. 6499/19	Includes sexual orientation as a reason for recognition of refugee status.
carolina aurea	PSOL - MG	Application No. 69/19	Requests the Minister of Citizenship, Mr. Osmar Terra, to provide information about the statements made by President Jair Bolsonaro when he vetoed resources for audiovisual productions with themes of LGBT and Racial Diversity.
Luizianne Lins	PT - CE	Application No. 81/19	<i>“Requires the holding of a Public Hearing to discuss censorship against LGBT cultural expressions”.</i>

Source: Chamber of Deputies Internet Portal

## 2020 highlights

The 2020 legislative year began in February after the congressional recess.

The COVID pandemic interfered with legislative activity as of March 2020, when a health emergency was declared in Brazil. Because of this, the number of speeches and legislative proposals relating to our themes was reduced.

We examined 2019 in greater detail, above, demonstrating the main thematic cores and discursive dynamics. As we have seen, our thematic axes were not always debated, but often served as elements of accusation and response between the opposing groups in Congress. For 2020, we will focus on the analysis of a handful of cases that were representative of the controversies being fought over in the Chamber of Deputies. These were often outside events that mobilized congressional passions.

### The defense of religious freedom: the FUNAI appointment

I want to highlight a speech from the beginning of the year, before the health emergency was declared, an appointment from outside the technical staff of FUNAI (Brazil’s Indian affairs agency) caused controversy and was interpreted by evangelical congressmen as religious persecution and Christophobia. On 02/11/2020, Eli Borges (SD – TO) declared his repudiation of the Federal Public Ministry’s filing a civil action against the appointment of former evangelical missionary Ricardo Lopes Dias to the position of General Coordinator of Isolated and Recently Contacted Indigenous Peoples<sup>21</sup>. The Deputy stated that *“in Brazil there is much more Christophobia than homophobia”* and that *“despite being peaceful, we have to react, so that, someone cannot be condemned for being a Christian and thus not to assume a public position, a public function”*.

<sup>21</sup> Available at: <https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/funai-nomeia-ex-missionario-evangelico-para-protecao-indios-isolados-1-24230513>. Accessed on: 08/19/2020.

## Criticism of the Bolsonaro government

Beginning in March, we can identify documents responding to the COVID pandemic that are also related to one of our two thematic axes. In criticizing the Bolsonaro government's actions during the pandemic, the values defended by the left are contrasted with those defended by the government. In these discourses, leftist Congressmen associated the defense of life with respect for diversity.

On 05/14/2020, Ênio Verri (PT – PR) made a long speech criticizing Jair Bolsonaro's actions in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, stating that Bolsonaro's government had no concern for life, and that Congress' objective, in comparison "is the maintenance of life, the maintenance of our Nation. *And this is done with respect to each person, regardless of their income, their religion, their color, or their sexual orientation*".

Some speeches reacted to the criticisms made by the opposition to the mismanagement of health policies by President Bolsonaro, responding with the same accusations against the left already presented in 2019 and described above.

## Accusations of the left and defense of the government

Deputy Reinhold Stephanes Junior (PSD – PR), a Catholic, criticized the left-wing demonstrations, both by civilians and congresspeople, against President Jair Bolsonaro, on 6/2/2020. He began his speech by criticizing a demonstration against the Federal Government held in Curitiba, amid the Covid-19 pandemic: "*They defend the liberation of drugs, marijuana; they defend abortion, but they don't want medication to be released. When talking about hydroxychloroquine, it's horrible. Oh my God! And these are the people who defend the liberalization of abortion and drugs?*"

## Defense of fetal rights

With respect to legal abortion in 2020, there was a reaction to the WHO recommendations regarding the reproductive and family planning rights of women in vulnerable situations during the international Covid-19 crisis. Two parliamentarians took a stand with decrees against the technical note of the Ministry of Health regarding access to sexual and reproductive health in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The document took into account the WHO recommendations in the sense that the health units that offer these services were to continue to do so during the pandemic in order to reduce cases of unplanned pregnancies. According to the Ministry of Health: "International projections estimate that approximately 47 million women in 114 low- and middle-income countries may not have access to contraceptives and, therefore, it is possible for more than seven million unplanned pregnancies to take place among adolescents and women". In the Chamber of Deputies, federal Deputy Chris Tonietto (PSL – RJ) was the author of Projeto de Decreto Legislativo N° 250/2020, which attempted to bar Nota Técnica N° 16/2020 – COSMU/CGCIVI/DAPES/SAPS/MS, published by the Ministry of Health, which deals with access to sexual and reproductive health during the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil. Tonietto's decree would have repealed the technical note in its entirety. In justify their position, the Deputy stated that the note was cover for performing abortion in the country and it went against basic precepts of the Federal Constitution.

The second decree was authored by Dr. Jaziel (PL – CE): Projeto de Decreto Legislativo N° 251/2020. His proposition had the same objectives and effects as Chris Tonietto's in that it attempted to bar the technical note, with the following justification: "The current rules of the Ministry of Health on 'legal abortion' were created by PT administrations and open loopholes for abortions to be performed even during pregnancies that were not the result of rape, as well as creating for impunity for rapists, since a sexual violence report is not required [to get permission for the abortion]."

Four anti-abortion legislative proposals stand out in the first half of 2020, formulated in order to guarantee fetal rights. Three of these were authored by Catholic deputy Chris Tonietto (PSL – RJ).

**Table 7** - Pro-fetal rights anti-abortion legislative proposals (2020)

<b>Congressperson</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Legislative proposal</b>	<b>Subject of the proposal</b>
Chris Tonietto	PSL – RJ	Bill No. 1945/2020	Amends Article No. 127 of the Penal Code to include a cause for increased penalties for abortions performed due to microcephaly or any other malformation of the fetus.
Chris Tonietto	PSL – RJ	Bill No. 1979/2020	Amends the Statute of the Child and Adolescent to include the unborn child within the scope of the protection of the law.
Chris Tonietto	PSL – RJ	Indication No. 505/2020	Requires sending a Referral to the Federal Public Defender General in order to suggest the creation of a thematic group, within the scope of the Public Defender of the Union, for the purposes of legal and extrajudicial assistance to unborn children.
Paula Belmonte	Citizenship - DF	Bill No. 537/2020	Extends the rights of children during infancy to unborn children from conception on.

Source: Chamber of Deputies Internet Portal

Proposals such as the inclusion of unborn children in the ECA (Children and Adolescents’ Statute), providing legal assistance for unborn children, and including them in policies for early childhood showed the growing tendency to extend the rights to the fetus from conception on, a theme analyzed by Dworkin (2003). It should be noted in this context that congresswoman Paula Belmonte is a spiritist (União do Vegetal) and Tonietto is a Catholic, as discussed above. These measures provide yet another example of the engagement of religious agents in the anti-abortion agenda.

### Sexual diversity against discrimination

In 2020, more speeches favorable to sexual and gender diversity were also made. Criticisms of President Jair Bolsonaro’s stance on diversity were frequently added to the speeches in favor of diversity made by left-wing parliamentarians against the President.

Among the legislative proposals presented was Projeto de Lei N° 3598/2020, by João H. Campos (PSB – PE/no identified religion), which regulated blood donation by gay men, This proposal was in line with the decision of the STF, which in May 2020 decided that the ban on homosexuals from donating blood was unconstitutional<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> Available at: <http://portal.stf.jus.br/noticias/verNoticiaDetalhe.asp?idConteudo=443015&ori=1>. Accessed on: 09/30/2020.

## Against LGBT rights

In the first half of 2020, there were several regressive legislative proposals regarding LGBT rights, continuing the tone set by the proposals from the previous year. Three similar proposals were identified which sought to suppress the rights of the transgender population in Brazil.

**Table 8** - Legislative proposals against the rights of transgender people (2020)

<b>Congressperson</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Legislative proposal</b>	<b>Subject of the proposal</b>
Carla Zambelli	PSL – SP	Draft Legislative Decree No. 28/2020	Suspends the effects of Resolution No. 2,265 of September 20th, 2019 of the Federal Council of Medicine, which provides for specific care for people with gender dysphoria or transgender people and revokes Resolution CFM No. 1955 of 2010.
Chris Tonietto	PSL – RJ	Draft Legislative Decree No. 19/2020	Suspends the effects of Resolution No. 2,265 of September 20th, 2019 of the Federal Council of Medicine, which provides for specific care for people with gender dysphoria or transgender people and revokes Resolution CFM No. 1955 of 2010.
Vitor Hugo	PSL – GO	Draft Legislative Decree No. 47/2020	Suspends the effects of Resolution No. 2,265 of September 20th, 2019 of the Federal Council of Medicine, which provides for specific care for people with gender dysphoria or transgender people and revokes Resolution CFM No. 1955 of 2010.

Source: Chamber of Deputies Internet Portal

The proposals of these three PSL deputies all suspend the effects of Resolução n° 2265/2019 of the Federal Council of Medicine, which discusses care for transgender people, and also revoke Resolução N° 1955/2010, which provides for gender reassignment surgery in Brazil. Arguments from the areas of health and law were used to support these proposals. Zambelli said hormone therapy treatment is invasive for children and adolescents and its long-term effects are unknown. Tonietto added that the stipulated age for the right to treatment is an affront to civil legislation, because *“if the minor is not fully developed to bear the penal consequences of his choices, as critics of the reduction of the penal age say, why would he be able to choose to go through drastic interventions, which give rise to irreversible changes”* The justifications for the proposal submitted by Vitor Hugo was in the same sense as Tonietto’s. Chris Tonietto and Vitor Hugo are both Catholics.

## The right to choose: the case of the Capixaba girl

Contrasting the first half of 2020 with the second, we can see a greater balance in progressive actions in relation to the agenda of abortion and sexual diversity. In the first semester, no pro-choice legislative proposition was identified, but we found thirteen in the second. This is because congressional activities take place in constant dialogue with and in reaction to events in civil society. When analyzing the purpose and justifications of these proposals, it is possible to discern relationships with the controversies involving significant events that mobilized society, such as a case that involved a girl from the State of Espírito Santo.

When analyzing the speeches and propositions about abortion in 2020, one can notice the predominance of documents related to the controversy involving the 10-year-old girl from the State of Espírito Santo who had a legal abortion after becoming pregnant following a rape committed by her uncle.<sup>23</sup> The case gained media coverage and even more visibility after right-wing activist Sara Winter disclosed, on her social networks, the victim's data and the hospital where the procedure would be performed. Winter mobilized her supporters to hold face-to-face and virtual demonstrations against the termination of the pregnancy<sup>24</sup>. In response, proposals were presented in Congress to guarantee the victim's access to legal abortion. Deputies from the PSOL proposed measures creating a protection zone around health establishments that provide legal abortion services in Brazil, evoking the protests that took place in front of the hospital where the Capixaba girl was waiting for care. Also in this context is the bill by Marreca Filho (Patriota – MA), which pleads for priority in the judgment of requests for termination of pregnancy when they involve cases of child victims of sexual abuse. Both Marreca was Catholic, and this was a rare case of progressive action undertaken by a religious Congressman.

In addition to these proposals, several requests were also submitted to the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights and to Minister Damares Alves, which sought to clarify the Minister's involvement in the case of the Capixaba girl and whether she had disclosed confidential information to Sara Winter. These included requests for clarifications from Minister Damares, in addition to requests for clarifications from the Minister of Health about her omissive conduct, and to the Minister of Foreign Affairs about an international alliance against legal abortion.

In a somewhat divergent strategy, Deputy Diogo Garcia (Podemos-PR), a Catholic member of the Charismatic Renewal Movement, asked the Minister of Health for information from DATASUS on pregnancy in childhood and adolescence and the resulting mortality rates, probably in order to minimize the problem and confront the rhetoric that the forced pregnancy of a 10 year old girl was a public health problem.

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23 The girl was abused by her uncle and, at the age of 10, she became pregnant, a fact that generated media and political repercussions after the leak of the process that authorized the termination of her pregnancy resulting from rape, provided for by the law. Available at: <https://g1.globo.com/es/espírito-santo/noticia/2020/08/28/menina-de-11-anos-fica-gravida-apos-estupro-no-norte-do-es.ghtml>. Accessed on: 07/07/2021.

24 Sara Winter was one of the figures responsible for the movement against abortion, having exposed the name of the victim and the address of the hospital where the procedure was performed. Available at: <https://www.uol.com.br/universa/noticias/redacao/2020/08/16/sara-winter-divulga-endereco.htm>. Accessed on: 07/07/2021.

**Table 9** - Legislative proposals on abortion: the case of the Capixaba girl (2020)

<b>Congressperson</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Legislative proposal</b>	<b>Subject of the proposal</b>
Sâmia Bomfim	PSOL SP	Bill No. 4297/2020	Provides for the creation of a protection zone around health facilities that provide legal abortion services and services that provide specialized care to women who are victims of sexual violence.
Luiza Erundina	PSOL SP		
Carolina Áurea	PSOL MG		
Fernanda Melchionna	PSOL RS		
Marreca Filho	PATRIOT - MA	Bill No. 4550/2020	Provides for the protection of children and adolescent victims of sexual violence, so that child victims of sexual abuse will have priority in the judgment of requests for termination of pregnancy.
Marreca Filho	PATRIOT - MA	Application No. 2187/2020	Requests the presence of Minister Damares Alves to provide clarification on the attempt to interfere in the abortion performed by a girl from Espírito Santo and on the relationships of the right-wing activist Sara Winter (Giromini) with the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights.
Alice Portugal	PCdoB - BA	Information Request No. 1283/2020.	Requires clarification from the Minister of Women, Family and Human Rights, Damares Alves, on the actions of the Minister and her team to prevent a ten-year-old child, raped by her uncle, from having the right to a legal abortion.
Sâmia Bomfim	PSOL - SP	Information Request No. 1039/2020	Requires the Acting Minister of Health, Mr. Eduardo Pazuello, information regarding the omissive conduct of the Ministry of Health in the episode of the ten-year-old girl from Espírito Santo who was the victim of rape and who found it difficult to perform a legal abortion in the SUS, as well as the demonstrations against legal abortion by the leader of this Ministry.
Sâmia Bomfim	PSOL - SP	Application No. 2328/2020.	Requires the summons of the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, SR. ERNESTO ARAÚJO, to clarify the alliance with the USA for an international initiative against legal abortion.
Diego Garcia	CAN - PR	Information Request No. 1207/2020	Asks His Excellency the Minister of Health information concerning DATASUS and pregnancy in childhood and adolescence, as well as mortality resulting from abortion in childhood and adolescence.

Source: Chamber of Deputies Internet Portal

In these speeches, Minister Damares Alves was accused of having tried to prevent the interruption of the girl's pregnancy by sending representatives who would try to convince the victim's family to give up the abortion and transfer the girl to a hospital in São Paulo, where she would wait for the delivery of the baby<sup>25</sup>. Speeches questioning the Minister involved Jandira Feghali (PCdoB-RJ) on 08/18/2020, Alice Portugal (PCdoB - BA) on the same day and again on 09/21/2020<sup>26</sup>, day the Minister was also targeted by Lídice da Mata (PSB - BA) and Sâmia Bomfim (PSOL - SP). The speeches given on 09/21 were made when the theme of abortion was once again taken up due to the SUS ordinance, a point that will be analyzed below.

The case was also the target of anti-abortion speeches, which classified it as murder. These were made by Soraya Manato (PSL - ES), evangelical, on 08/18/2020, who stated that it was no longer an abortion, but a premature birth, called by her a "crime" and "infanticide", emphasizing that the "child was 23 weeks pregnant". She concluded defending Minister Damares: "*she is in favor of life, just as we Christians - I am evangelical - are in favor of life, not death*". On the same day, Eros Biondini (PROS - MG), a Catholic, stated that one barbarity (rape) could not be fought by carrying out another (abortion) and defended that the pregnancy should be continued and that the baby should be given up for adoption at birth. On that same date, Gilberto Nascimento (PSC - SP), an evangelical, spoke in defense of Damares, stating that the Minister was not responsible for leaking the news of the pregnancy and abortion.

On 11/3/2020, Soraya Manato (PSL - ES) began her speech by claiming to be right-wing, conservative, and Christian and taking a stand against the Federal Public Prosecutor's (MPF) Office that had filed a public civil action for the implementation of referral services for abortion in two hospitals in Espírito Santo. It is possible that the MPF's action was in response to the difficulty of the Capixaba girl in obtaining a legal abortion.

## Fetal rights vs. right to choose: the controversy over the abortion ordinance

Still with regards to the thematic axis of abortion, another highlight of the year was the ordinance that regulated legal abortion (and it made more difficult). This generated a set of anti-abortion and pro-choice speeches and legislative proposals. This was Portaria N° 2.282/2020, of August 27th, 2020, published by the Ministry of Health, regarding the justification and authorization of termination of pregnancy in cases provided for by law. It should be noted that the Ministry of Health issued the ordinance a few days after the case of the request for a legal abortion by the girl from Espírito Santo reached the press and became a major controversy.

In the Chamber of Deputies, congress peoples from the PSOL, PT<sup>27</sup>, PCdoB, PSB, PSDB, and PDT<sup>28</sup> parties<sup>29</sup> criticized the ordinance and presented Draft Legislative Decrees to halt its effects, as they understood that the ordinance would make it more difficult to carry out abortion procedures by forcing health professionals

25 Available at: <https://www.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2020/09/ministra-damares-alves-agiu-para-impedir-aborto-de-crianca-de-10-anos.shtml>. Accessed on: 07/07/2021.

26 "Mrs. Damares, this was a child's body. Children are not mothers. Ten-year-old girls can't give birth, Mrs. Damares. It is very important that you know this, because it is a body still in formation".

27 Another block of parliamentarians who presented a legislative proposal to stop Ordinance No. 2282/2020 was from the PT, in which 41 male and female deputies signed the Draft Legislative Decree No. 413/2020. São eles: Enio Verri (PT - PR), Maria do Rosário (PT - RS), Beto Faro (PT - PA), Waldenor Pereira (PT - BA), Nilto Tatto (PT - SP), Arlindo Chinaglia (PT - SP), Erika Kokay (PT - DF), Benedita da Silva (PT - RJ), Vander Loubet (PT - MS), Vicentinho (PT - SP), Merlong Solano (PT - PI), Professora Rosa Neide (PT - MT), Marcon (PT - RS), Afonso Florence (PT - BA), Paulão (PT - AL), Leonardo Monteiro (PT - MG), Paulo Guedes (PT - MG), Valmir Assunção (PT - BA), Rogério Correia (PT - MG), Natália Bonavides (PT - RN), Airton Faleiro (PT - PA), Frei Anastacio Ribeiro (PT - PB), João Daniel (PT - SE), Gleisi Hoffmann (PT - PR), Patrus Ananias (PT - MG), Rui Falcão (PT - SP), Padre João (PT - MG), José Airton Félix Cirilo (PT - CE), Helder Salomão (PT - ES), Célio Moura (PT - TO), Pedro Uczai (PT - SC), Margarida Salomão (PT - MG), Carlos Veras (PT - PE), Luizianne Lins (PT - CE), Alencar Santana Braga (PT - SP), Zé Carlos (PT - MA), Jorge Solla (PT - BA), Paulo Teixeira (PT - SP), José Guimarães (PT - CE), Bohn Gass (PT - RS), Paulo Pimenta (PT - RS).

28 Mário Heringer (PDT - MG), in Draft Legislative Decree No. 385/2020,

29 Members Jandira Feghali (PCdoB - RJ), Fernanda Melchionna (PSOL - RS), Perpétua Almeida (PCdoB - AC), Alice Portugal (PCdoB - BA), Sâmia Bomfim (PSOL - SP), Luiza Erundina (PSOL - SP), Lídice da Mata (PSB - BA), Natália Bonavides (PT - RN), Áurea Carolina (PSOL - MG) and Erika Kokay (PT - DF) presented the Draft Legislative Decree No. 381/2020.



to call the police whenever the procedure is requested by the victim in cases of rape. The measure also called for requiring mothers to undergo an ultrasound to visualize the fetus. This was understood as an attempt to embarrass the victim and push her to abandon the abortion and keep the unwanted pregnancy. In defense of the issue, Soraya Manato (PSL – ES) spoke out, congratulating the Bolsonaro government for Ordinance 2282/20 and celebrating that police officers are informed about pregnant women who are victims of rape and that, now, doctors should preserve the material evidence of the crime for investigative purposes and proclaimed: “congratulations, President Bolsonaro, for yet another attitude towards preserving lives ! ” . Sâmia Bomfim (PSOL-SP), Erika Kokay (PT – DF), Alice Portugal (PCdoB – BA) twice, Lídice da Mata ( PSB – BA), in addition to Jandira Feghali (PCdoB – RJ) who directed her speech to rebut Soraya Manato .

On September 23rd, the Ministry of Health published a new Portaria N° 2561/2020 on the same topic and did not change the articles that received criticism from the left congresspeople. The new ordinance was the target of more criticism and of other Legislative Decree Proposals to stop its effects. In combating the new decree, Congresspeople Jandira Feghali (PCdoB - RJ), Alice Portugal (PCdoB - BA), Erika Kokay (PT - DF), Maria do Rosário (PT - RS), Sâmia Bomfim (PSOL - SP), Tereza Nelma (PSDB - AL), Lídice da Mata (PSB - BA), Professor Rosa Neide (PT - MT), Luíza Erundina (PSOL - SP), Fernanda Melchionna (PSOL - RS), Áurea Carolina (PSOL - MG), Talíria Petrone (PSOL - RJ), and Gleisi Hoffmann (PT - PR) all presented Projeto de Decreto Legislativo N° 409/2020, which suspended the newly published ordinance.

Despite the increase in pro-choice proposals located in the second half of 2020, it can be seen that these were more reactions than pro-choice actions in Congress. Parliamentarians were more active in guaranteeing the sexual and reproductive rights of women that had already been conquered and in preventing setbacks than in expanding the permission for legal abortion in Brazil. No proposals were found that pushed for this objective. Events in civil society directly influenced parliamentary action, since a controversy involving legal abortion figured in a large part of the speeches we found, whether by those in favor or those against abortion. There were also several proposals to guarantee safe abortion in cases permitted by law.

## Discursive dynamics: against discrimination and for the freedom to discriminate

One of the main issues with reference to the thematic axis of sexual diversity revolves around accusations of discrimination and privilege, a point extensively explored in the 2019 documents we uncovered. We will now examine an emblematic case of this debate. In the Chamber of Deputies, with respect to the issue of discrimination against LGBT people, there was intense debate around Requerimento de Urgência N° 2793/2020, authored by Enio Verri (PT – PR) and others, requesting the urgent processing of Projeto de Lei N° 1531/2020 which prohibits discrimination in access to or maintenance of employment due to sexual orientation, race, chronic illness, HIV/AIDS, and religion. The debate took place on 12/22/2020. In response, Otoni de Paula (PSC – RJ) said it was another attempt to impose “gender ideology” and claimed that it was an employer’s right not to want to hire an evangelical, a woman, or a gay man. Eli Borges (SD - TO), in turn, stated that he did not see the need for a proposition like this because he did not see “*any boss discriminating against a competent employee*”. He also stated that there is no discrimination in churches: “*I am challenging people and asking where in Brazil there is a pastor expelling homosexuals from the church or where in Brazil there is a boss expelling competent homosexuals from their jobs?*” Among the manifestations in favor of the project, Sâmia Bomfim (PSOL – SP) pointed out that the LGBT population faces difficulties in getting and keeping jobs due to prejudice. Erika Kokay (PT – DF) stated that human diversity is natural and, therefore, people cannot be hierarchized, emphasizing that it is “*unbelievable that we are here discussing whether or not people can be discriminated against in the world of work*”.

## Against STF activism: religious freedom and the anti-gender and anti-diversity perspective

In relation to sexual and gender diversity, several accusations of usurpation of the Legislature by the STF in judging issues that guaranteed rights to the LGBT population were filed. The PSOL filed ADI N° 5668 with the STF, with the objective of combating homophobic bullying based on gender identity and sexual orientation in schools. The action was the victim of the dissemination of “fake news” in civil society which was also repeated in speeches in the Chamber of Deputies. Congresspeople accused the STF of “legislating” in favor of “gender ideology” and of imposing its will on the Brazilian population and the other Powers of the republic. These congressmen understood the issue to be specific to the Legislative Power. On 10/27/2020. Eros Biondini (PROS – MG), Catholic of the Charismatic Renewal Movement, defended the approval of PL N° 4754/2016, which “*typifies the usurpation of competence of the Legislative Power as a crime for which Justices of the Federal Supreme Court are responsible*”, in order to bar decisions such as ADO 26, which criminalized homophobia and transphobia. In relation to this achievement, it is worth mentioning Projeto de Lei N° 4892/2020, presented by Léo Motta (PSL – MG), evangelical from the Assembly of God, which “clarifies that the refusal to carry out religious ceremonies involving openly homosexual people does not characterize a homophobic crime”. Motta considered this measure necessary in order to ensure that religious leaders would not be forced to hold religious ceremonies for LGBT people.

### Final considerations

The analysis of the speeches and legislative proposals referring to the themes of abortion and sexual diversity in the first two years of the Bolsonaro government shows the intensification of the trend identified in recent years of the conservative reaction against the possibilities of legal abortion (Luna, 2019, L.Z. Machado, 2017) and against LGBT rights and against expressions of diversity, even in cultural manifestations. In this sense, sexual wars (Natividade and Oliveira, 2013) have become the agenda of the cultural war, expressed even in Eduardo Bolsonaro’s speech on 12/18/19.

This war also takes place on the discursive level in the Chamber of Deputies. Congresspeople who support the president disqualified the “left” as defenders of abortion, gender ideology, the legalization of drugs, and the destruction of the family. These accusations often seem persecutory, as in the debate on the Statute of Families, with false claims that the Statue promoted incest. There was a clash of referents. The left took up the memory of PT governments to praise inclusive policies for the LGBT population and associated President Bolsonaro and his supporters with death and persecution, homophobia, misogyny, and racism. Bolsonaro supporters, in turn, return the salvo with charges that the left promotes death.

One can see here the dynamics of inversion of accusations, in which Christians deny the existence of homophobia and accuse the other side of vilification and religious intolerance, which they call Christophobia.

Antagonistic ways of defending and conceiving of individual freedoms are in dispute. On the one hand, the right to religious freedom (and by extension the right to discriminate) and full rights for the fetus/embryo are claimed and supported. On the other hand, there is the defense of sexual and reproductive rights, the right to gender expression and the free exercise of sexuality, and the right to choose (in case of abortion). Such demands are all based on individualist configuration of values (Dumont, 1997).

One can see great engagement by those parliamentarians with a public religious identity in this conservative reaction, especially evangelicals, and most especially from the Assembly of God. Few congresspeople used explicitly religious language and biblical quotations, with Chris Tonietto, Otoni de Paula and Pastor Sargento Isidório being notable exceptions. A larger group of Congresspeople, however, alleges persecution of Christians

or disrespect for the Christian religion. Another aspect of this rhetoric is to claim that the conservative position, in defense of the family or against abortion, represents the opinion of most Brazilians, a point already observed in other studies (Barros, Bernardes and Pinto, 2018).

Even explicit religious language, however, seems in some cases to be combined with other languages endowed with greater legitimacy, such as scientific, or legal arguments. There seem to be different ways of building legitimacy (Montero, 2012): when congresswoman Chris Tonietto prays an Ave Maria at the beginning of her speech on 7/4/2019 (a new fact observed in these years of research), manifesting her Catholic identity, she is on par with evangelical parliamentarians who brandish the Bible. This expression, which delegitimizes her in front of those who defend separation of Church and State, strengthens the Deputy in front of her electorate. On the other hand, Tonietto herself, in her legislative proposals, manifests solid legal arguments, associating these with biological arguments in defense of the fetus.

Regarding arguments for fetal rights, previously identified patterns remain apparent. Regarding the right to life, there are two different ideas appearing in the public debate on abortion. One thesis assumes that “fetuses are creatures with interests of their own from conception on... including the right to not be killed” (Dworkin, 2003: 12). This represents the right to life perspective. According to the second thesis, “abortion is wrong in principle, because it disregards and insults the intrinsic value, the sacredness, of any stage or form of human life” (2003:13). The character of the fetus as a subject is reinforced in proposals to guarantee it legal representation, to the detriment of pregnant women who are disembodied.

In a related sense, solidarity seems to be reduced in dramatic cases of legal dispute over abortion, such as that of the girl from Espírito Santo. In a similar case that occurred in 2009 involving a girl from Pernambuco (Lamim and Luna, 2016), reactions in the Chamber against abortion were practically non-existent. This is in frank contrast with the mobilizations in favor of the “unborn child” and the new discourses of “saving both lives” that are now being seen on the floor of Congress. Praise for the government for the ordinance that makes access to legal abortion more difficult also go in the same direction.

During rise of the conservative Bolsonaro government, with regards to the subject of sexual diversity, fake news was disseminated about the sexualization of children. The right to health policies aimed at the LGBT segment were persecuted because they are “gender ideology” or a demand for privileges. Cultural manifestations were monitored for their potential to corrupt children. Overall, a concerted effort was made to make these subjects invisible or to reduce claims to “poor-me-ism”.

The mobilization of congresspeople in favor of LGBT rights and in denouncing discrimination and violence against this population was consistently much greater than defenses of the right to choose in the debate on abortion. Several legislative proposals were forwarded contemplating the demands of diversity, but none were forwarded to increase abortion rights.

In this sense, it is possible to see that the Chamber of Deputies seems more likely to guarantee rights regarding sexual diversity than to abortion. This can be deduced from the greater number of anti-abortion speeches and proposals we discovered when compared to the subject of sexual diversity and also from the absence of proposals favorable to the voluntary termination of pregnancy in this legislative house. In relation to LGBT rights, both conservatives and progressives strongly dialogued with the decisions of the STF, whether to regulate blood donation by homosexuals in Brazil, in accusations of judicial activism, or even in reframing LGBTphobic practices of intolerance as a matter of individual freedom of belief. Finally, it should be noted that the accusatory category of “gender ideology” is often used by conservatives in speeches and in the formulation of legislative proposals that seek to stop the advancement of rights for Brazil’s trans population.

Conservative segments in the first two years of the Bolsonaro government thus defended regressive guidelines regarding women's and LGBT rights. This was especially the case among congresspeople with a public religious identity. These activities, along with the rhetoric of persecution and the denunciation of alleged Christophobia in cultural manifestations, are elements triggered in processes of minoritization. The left, the opposition to Bolsonaro, the LGBT movement, and the Federal Supreme Court are those agents that constitute the instances of persecution that supposedly harass the so-called conservative and Christian minority.

In discursive disputes we have analyzed here, accusations are exchanged and reversed in order to mark differences in relation to the opposing group. In this way, abortion and sexual diversity are displayed in accusations to disqualify the opposition, and charges of misogyny and homophobia are used as offenses against the ruler and his supporters. Each side tries to present itself as a defender of life and associate the other with death.

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# The Bolsonaroist Bloc: ethnographic notes on political performances and a parliamentary network in Brazil's Chamber of Deputies

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## Abstract

The article presents the first ethnographic notes from a research project on the performances of a group of parliamentarians in the Chamber of Deputies in the 2019-2023 legislature. As a starting point, I highlight a group of elected deputies associated with the universe of Bolsonaroism. The latter is approached as a complex set of elements containing different ideas and whose main political reference is the figure of Jair Bolsonaro, though it also encompasses diverse elements from the so-called Brazilian “new right” and conservatism. I present two episodes to help situate this empirical universe. In the first, I assemble clues and traces from a complaint submitted to the Parliamentary Ethics and Decorum Council in order to analyse the formation of the Bolsonaroist Bloc. The second episode centres on the debate surrounding a law bill on the Commission on Human Rights and Minorities. Setting out from these episodes, I analyse differences between the performances of Bolsonaroist deputies and the parliamentary behaviour prevailing in the National Congress. I conclude the article by pointing to some analytical paths for the future development of this investigation.

**Keywords:** Anthropology of Politics, Anthropology of Parliament, Parliament, Bolsonaroism, Political Bloc.

# Bancada bolsonarista: notas etnográficas de performances políticas e uma rede parlamentar na Câmara dos deputados

## Resumo

O artigo apresenta as primeiras notas etnográficas de uma pesquisa sobre as performances de um conjunto de parlamentares na Câmara dos Deputados na legislatura 2019-2023. Como ponto de partida, destaco um grupo de deputados eleitos associados ao universo do Bolsonarismo, considerando esse último um conjunto complexo que abriga diferentes ideias e que tem como principal referencial político a figura de Jair Bolsonaro, comportando também elementos diversificados da chamada “nova direita” brasileira e do conservadorismo. Apresento dois episódios para situar o universo empírico. No primeiro, organizo pistas e rastros a partir de uma representação submetida ao Conselho de Ética e Decoro Parlamentar para analisar a formação do grupo bolsonarista. O segundo episódio tem como elemento central o debate de um projeto de lei na Comissão de Direitos Humanos e Minorias. A partir deles, analiso diferenças entre as performances dos deputados bolsonaristas e o comportamento parlamentar predominante no Congresso Nacional. Finalizo o artigo apontando alguns caminhos analíticos para os desdobramentos dessa investigação.

**Palavras-chave:** Antropologia da Política, Antropologia do Parlamento, Parlamento, Bolsonarismo, Bancada.



# The Bolsonaroist Bloc: ethnographic notes on political performances and a parliamentary network in Brazil's Chamber of Deputies

*Tiago de Aragão*

## Introduction

The victory of Jair Messias Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections represented more than his own rise to the highest office in Brazil's federal republic. It also demonstrated the regional diffusion and consolidation of a far right electorate. Swept along by the phenomenon of Bolsonaroism – which has become a topic of some intrigue for Brazil's social sciences – representatives of this political upsurge were elected to the federal houses and state legislatures across the country. In the Chamber of Deputies alone, the Social Liberal Party (PSL),<sup>1</sup> on whose ticket Bolsonaro ran as a presidential candidate in 2018, went from holding one seat in the preceding term to 52 seats in the ballot for the 56<sup>th</sup> legislature.

In this groundswell, rather than presenting a centralized set of programs for government, the 'Bolsonarist wave' manifested an anti-party and anti-system political tendency (Solano, 2019). Voicing a political desire to annihilate the left, confront progressivists and reject conventional democratic politics, it won over an electorate that secured mandates for names until then unknown in the national political setting and received high numbers of votes in 2018, including the election of Eduardo Bolsonaro with 1.8 million votes, consolidating Bolsonaroism as a powerful electoral force. In 2022, this potential was reaffirmed with the Liberal Party, now the new party ticket of Jair Messias Bolsonaro, which won the largest number of seats in the Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate.<sup>2</sup>

Since 2018, a series of studies of the Bolsonaroism phenomenon in Brazilian politics has emerged as part of an urgent and wide-ranging attempt to understand the multiple facets of this populist far-right movement, its specificities and vicissitudes.<sup>3</sup> As a complex and fluid phenomenon, Bolsonaroism can be understood as “a sociotechnical dynamic of continuous and performative mobilization” (Cesarino, 2022), linked to a set of emergent agendas and featuring a diverse array of actors, ranging from politicians to digital profiles, artists, YouTube channels, TV channels, activists, military personnel, lawyers, journalists and/or digital influencers.

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<sup>1</sup> The Social Liberal Party was a Brazilian political party that merged with the Democrats to form the Brazil Union (*União Brasil*), a merger recognized on 8 February 2022 by Brazil's Supreme Electoral Court.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth emphasizing that, unlike the PSL, the PL was already a well-established political party in Brazil before Jair Bolsonaro's affiliation and via which he would receive many of his allies. The impact of his affiliation on the party's growth is unquestionable, but the achievement of winning so many seats in the 2022 elections resulted from a combination of both forces.

<sup>3</sup> Various works have been published recently on this topic. Since they make the same use of ethnography or qualitative methods in their empirical research as my own inquiry, I highlight the works of Leticia Cesarino (Cesarino 2020, 2022), Camila Rocha (Rocha, 2018; Rocha & Medeiros, 2021) and Isabela Kalil (Kalil, 2018).

Situated within this universe with its huge diversity of manifestations and actors, I am developing a doctoral research project focused on the presence of Bolsonarism in the Chamber of Deputies, more specifically a group of 34 federal deputies elected in 2018 who form what has become known as the Bolsonarist Bloc (*Bancada Bolsonarista*). At its broadest level, the research investigates how this grouping acts in parliament and interacts with the institution and its set of rules. A set of rules that, given the dynamic of the legislative chamber itself, is simultaneously consolidated and constantly placed in tension. The present text is the first publication deriving from this research.

In this article I present the first notes from an ethnography of performance of this set of lawmakers in the Chamber of Deputies in the 2019-2023 legislature. As a starting point, I foreground the group of elected deputies who operate and are associated with the universe of Bolsonarism. Participant observation began in exploratory fashion at the start of the 56<sup>th</sup> legislature with in-person monitoring of meetings, sessions and events at the National Congress. After delineating the group of parliamentarians who would feature centrally in the research, the Bolsonarist Bloc, the ethnography intensified and began to consider the agendas and spaces that mobilized the group's activities. Commission meetings, public events and plenary sessions assumed a key place in the research as settings for the political performances and clashes. Although the observation is more extensive, here I have opted to analyse two *social situations* (Gluckman, 1987) where I deploy everything I learnt in the field in order to interpret these events. The specific period during which the two episodes occurred was prior to the interruption of my in-person research following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. After this time, the Chamber of Deputies website and the transmission of its meetings and sessions on YouTube, previously auxiliary resources to review and reinforce what I had observed in person, acquired a much more significant role in the construction of my data.

The two situations and their controversies are used to situate the empirical universe of my analysis. In the first case, I assemble clues and traces based on a complaint submitted to the Parliamentary Ethics and Decorum Council of the Chamber of Deputies in order to analyse how the Bolsonarist group coalesced. Its formation can be observed primarily through the controversies. The setting for the second situation is the clash over a law bill on the Commission on Human Rights and Minorities. Through this case, I analyse differences between the performances of the Bolsonarist deputies and the parliamentary behaviour predominant in the National Congress. Next, I indicate some analytic paths for the future development of this investigation and the research agenda.

The attempt to understand this political grouping is later taken up in a discussion of the empirical and analytic challenges presented by the study of thematic blocs for investigations in diverse parliaments.

In the second part of the article, I explore the episode from the Commission on Human Rights and Minorities. As well as presenting the performance of different deputies, I include an analysis of social network posts and publications, chosen because they echoed the controversy or were mentioned by subjects during the event in question, thus making them relevant to reconstructing its wider setting.

Bolsonarism makes its presence felt in diverse spaces and utilizes different strategies to sustain itself and keep its base engaged, amplifying its influence on Brazilian politics in the process. The Chamber of Deputies was an important space of visibility in Jair Bolsonaro's 27-year career as a parliamentarian: comprehending the action of this political phenomenon in the institutional spaces of doing politics is thus one of the interests guiding this investigative enterprise.

## THE CONTROVERSIES: on the formation of the parliamentary collective

We – deputies of the PSL, Laterça, Colonel Chrisóstomo, Jordy, Aline, Silva – belong to the outraged who until yesterday had no space here. Until yesterday, it was Pastor Marco Feliciano, Jair Bolsonaro, one or two from the Evangelical Bloc. Now you're all going have to put up with us! There's no use chanting slogans and saying that you present women because we've broken your hegemony. And here nobody bends over for the politically correct, no way. We're going to continue speaking, fine by you? (Chamber of Deputies, 2020)

4 March 2020. Ethics and Parliamentary Decorum Council of the Chamber of Deputies. Reading of the preliminary report of Deputy Eduardo Costa (PTB)<sup>4</sup> referring to Complaint n. 12 of 2019, submitted by the Social Liberal Party (PSL), against Deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro (affiliated at the time to the PSL, currently linked to the Liberal Party (PL)) and formulated by Deputy Joyce Hasselmann (at the time PSL; today Brazil Union). The complaint is read by the rapporteur: over its seven pages are set out the *fatos* (facts) against the deputy. The document is based on the texts of the Federal Constitution (Article 55), the Internal Regulations of the Chamber of Deputies – RICD (Articles 240 and 244) and the Code of Ethics and Parliamentary Decorum of the Chamber of Deputies (Article 5).

Briefly, the conflict emerged from a dispute over the post of leader of the PSL, a position occupied in the first year of the 2019-2023 legislature by the deputy Police Chief Waldir. According to the complaint, the President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro, was keen to see Deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro, his son, assume the post of party leader. Opposing this move, Deputy Joyce Hasselmann – then leader of the government in the Chamber – publicly declared her support for Police Chief Waldir to remain as leader of the PSL. The complaint alleges that the parliamentarian Joyce Hasselmann was removed from the post of government leader – a position that, according to the document, she had performed with “diligence and dedication” – as part of the government’s retaliation.

**Figure 1:** Collage of fake banknote with Joyce Hasselmann’s face



Also according to the complaint, as part of the same series of reprisals, Deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro had incited a “virtual lynching” of the congresswoman, the most striking symbol of this attack being the publication of a collage with Joyce Hasselmann’s face emblazoned on an obviously fake three reais banknote (a non-existent denomination). The document relates the construction of a “defamatory and libellous” campaign and the orchestration of an “odious chain reaction” against the “objective and subjective honour” of the congresswoman. The complaint concluded with the formal request to launch a disciplinary procedure that would see Eduardo Bolsonaro disqualified from office.

<sup>4</sup> Brazilian Labour Party (*Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro*).

The honour in question centres around two aspects: first, the honour of the person, on which the defence of Deputy Joice Hasselmann is based; second, the honour of the collective, where we need to consider that “dishonourable contact is not limited to the individual who committed it but compromises the entire collective to which this individual belongs,” a political process being capable here of elucidating the “boundaries and conditions of political belonging” (Teixeira, 1998: 44) updated over time. Hence, the discussion of any complaint examined by the Ethics and Parliamentary Decorum Council also refers to an idea, here under dispute, about the type of conduct that parliamentarians should ideally manifest.

As a result of this complaint, Deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro, in just his second mandate, became the parliamentarian with the highest number of complaints referred to the Ethics Council, surpassing even his father, the former deputy and then current President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro.

It was not only Deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro who was subject to a complaint launched by his own party. Carla Zambelli, Carlos Jordy, Filipe Barros, Daniel Silveira, Alê Silva and Bibó Nunes were also subject to complaints submitted on 11 November 2019, in the same context of internal tensions within the PSL and related to the name of the President, Jair Bolsonaro, elected by the Social Liberal Party but who spent a period of 24 months without any party affiliation.<sup>5</sup> Jair Bolsonaro’s exit from the PSL was followed by the announcement of the plan to create the Alliance for Brazil (*Aliança Pelo Brasil*), a new party that was projected around the name of the head of the executive and sought to be eligible to compete in the 2020 municipal elections. On 7 December 2019, 26 federal deputies from the PSL<sup>6</sup> filed a request for disaffiliation from the party, alleging internal political persecution. However, the requirement to obtain 500,000 signatures was an obstacle to the creation of the new party.

Controversies like these, involving lawmakers affiliated to the PSL, provide important clues for understanding the emergence and formation of a network of deputies, an action set, that I provisionally call the ‘Bolsonarist Bloc.’

Concerning the set of complaints made against this group of deputies, it is worth emphasizing that the overwhelming majority of the facts related in the documents refer to actions in the virtual domain, involving the profiles of the deputies, propagated on social networks and via instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram. The complaint against Deputy Daniel Silveira is the exception: he was accused of recording a meeting of the PSL leadership without the consent of those present and then releasing it to the press.<sup>7</sup>

The Social Liberal Party was the standout success of the 2018 elections when it elected 52 deputies. The party obtained the largest growth in the Chamber of Deputies compared to the preceding 2015-2019 legislature, when it elected just one parliamentarian.

5 His disaffiliation from the PSL was announced on 12 November 2019. On 30 November, he joined the Liberal Party.

6 The deputies who filed a request for justified disaffiliation and continuance in office were Bibó Nunes (RS); Alê Silva (MG); Aline Sleutjes (PR); Bia Kicis (DF); Carla Zambelli (SP); Carlos Jordy (RJ); Caroline de Toni (SC); Chris Tonietto (RJ); Daniel Freitas (SC); Daniel Silveira (RJ); Eduardo Bolsonaro (SP); General Girão (RN); Filipe Barros (PSL); Junio Amaral (MG); Luiz Philippe de Orleans e Bragança (SP); Luiz Lima (RJ); Luiz Ovando (MS); Léo Motta (MG); Helio Lopes (RJ); Colonel Chrisóstomo (RO); Guiga Peixoto (SP); Márcio Labre (RJ); Colonel Armando (SC); Sanderson (RS); Major Fabiana (RJ) and Major Vitor Hugo (GO). After the affiliation of Jair Bolsonaro to the Liberal Party, the vast majority of the Bolsonaroist deputies migrated to the PL in the 2022 ‘party window’ (a 30-day period when lawmakers can change party without losing their mandate, occurring six months before elections).

7 After publication of a video on YouTube containing attacks on ministers from the Supreme Federal Court (STF) and a series of manifestations against democratic institutions, Deputy Daniel Silveira assumed a leading role in a major public campaign against Brazil’s highest court. The Ethics Council of the Chamber of Deputies is currently processing nine complaints against the deputy, who is presently ignoring a judicial order to use an electronic ankle tag as part of a sentence restricting his movements decreed by the STF.

Figure 2: Post on the Instagram profile of Deputy Daniel Silveira



Though the party with the second highest number of lawmakers in the Chamber of Deputies, the PSL is fragmented by internal tensions, the most visible related to Bolsonaro himself. According to declarations by party cohorts in posts shared on their social networks and in YouTube live streams, there exist two main poles in the split: the first group was led by Eduardo Bolsonaro; the second was concentrated around the figure of the party president, Deputy Luciano Bivar (PSL/PE). While in a multiparty setting with 24 separate parties represented in the Chamber of Deputies, the party structure already experienced limitations and difficulties in organizing legislative work, especially in relation to voting procedures (Araújo & Silva, 2016), the bloc formed by the Social Liberal Party,<sup>8</sup> already in the first year of the legislature, confronted a major split that affected its internal cohesion and generated problems in terms of party loyalty. This fragmentation increased the visibility of what would become the collective at the centre of this article: the Bolsonaroist Bloc.

The Portuguese word *bancada* – translated here as bloc – is a polysemic term denominating diverse types of groupings, whether in discussions involving parliaments among political analysts from journalism or academia, or in its use as a native category. The term bloc (*bancada*) can refer to: (i) groupings officially classified in the Chamber’s internal regulations: parties, coalitions, government, opposition, majority and minority; (ii) the set of deputies elected by a particular federal state or the federal district; and (iii) groups of parliamentarians who mobilize around similar agendas. The Bolsonaroist Bloc is an example of this latter type, an informal bloc (DIAP, 2018) or a cross-party thematic bloc<sup>9</sup> (Araújo & Silva, 2016).

At the beginning of this legislature, the denomination linked to the name of Jair Bolsonaro was present in content published by the press and in parliamentary speeches, as the category classifying the set of deputies affiliated to the PSL. Over the course of the year, the term ‘Bolsonarist’ became increasingly centred on a specific group, spotlighted following the split in the party, and whose name was linked to the president of

8 The merger of the Social Liberal Party and the Democrats was approved by the Supreme Electoral Court (*Tribunal Superior Eleitoral*: TSE) in 2022, forming the Brazil Union (*União Brasil*). After this process, the new party became the largest in the Chamber of Deputies until the mass exodus during the “party window” when the Bolsonaroist deputies migrated to the PL.

9 Equivalent denominations can be found in the specialized international literature under general terms such as legislative member organization (LMO). More specifically, the United States Congress uses the terms caucuses and congressional member organizations, while in studies of the European Parliament, the term intergroups is commonplace (Ringe, Victor & Carman, 2013).

the republic. This change was a response to a series of crises and clashes, which influenced the behaviour of parliamentarians and changed how they were classified. This series of controversies would make the formation of this collective readily visible.

Contrary to a strategy that aims to identify convergences, consensus and similarities in order to understand an association, here I focus my attention on the contradictions and disputed elements to comprehend the formation of this collective. The strategy becomes one of seeking out the movements and traces left in the formation of this grouping to understand its existence and how it operates. Every crisis, dispute over meaning, manifestation, dilemma, innovation, document produced, YouTube video or meme shared on social networks becomes a potential component or mechanism in the identification and fabrication of the group. A trace to be followed:

Group formations leave many more traces in their wake than already established connections which, by definition, might remain mute and invisible. (...) ... every time a new grouping is alluded to the fabrication mechanism necessary to keep it alive will be made visible and thus traceable (Latour, 2012: 31).

Hence, the clues and traces left by the formation of this group can be sought in events, in the discourses of the subjects, and in the tangible and intangible productions over the period of the legislature. I use the term 'Bolsonarist' provisionally but from the very beginning of the legislature it was possible to observe two things. First, a group of deputies, mostly affiliated to the PSL, engaged in their parliamentary performance in a joint and coordinated fashion, forming a block in constant defence of the Bolsonaro government and around a common agenda composed by a set of issues linked to Bolsonaroism:<sup>10</sup> advocating a relaxation of firearm controls, anticommunism, punitive sentencing, combatting "gender ideology," defence of the "traditional Brazilian family," culture wars, anti-feminism, anti-PT (the Workers' Party) and an anti-system emulation, among other issues fronted by Jair Bolsonaro. Second, this terminology also began to be employed by other politicians as an accusatory category and also by the media, including application of the label 'Bolsonarist' to a broader set of parliamentarians extending beyond the Chamber of Deputies.<sup>11</sup>

As well as the group of deputies who requested disaffiliation from the PSL, this bloc also includes some members of other political parties. The construction of this list of members has involved the observation of the performances and associations of these parliamentarians on commissions, in the plenary session and on the Twitter social network by accompanying their profiles.

The parliamentarians are: Aline Sletjtes, Bia Kicis, Carlos Jordy, Caroline de Toni, Chris Tonietto, Colonel Chrisóstomo, Daniel Freitas, Eduardo Bolsonaro, Filipe Barros, Léo Motta, Luiz Lima, Luiz Ovando, Luiz Philippe de Orleans e Bragança, Major Fabiana, Major Vitor Hugo, Márcio Labre, Alê Silva, Bibó Nunes, Carla Zambelli, Colonel Armando, Daniel Silveira, General Girão, Guiga Peixoto, Helio Lopes, Junio Amaral, Sanderson, Police Chief Éder Mauro, Sergeant Fatur, Otoni de Paula, Kátia Sastre, Guilherme Derrite, Colonel Tadeu and Nelson Barbudo.

<sup>10</sup> Various terms are employed by parliamentarians, the media and social scientists to refer to this network of professional politicians, such as the new right, the conservative right or simply conservatives. It is worth emphasizing that these other terminologies tend to be used for a broader spectrum of actors; hence, I have opted to utilize the terms Bolsonaroism and Bolsonaroist to make clearer the network observed here. I highlight two recent doctoral theses in political science that focus on this broader group on the right of the political spectrum: the thesis by Marina Bassos Lacerda, "Neoliberalism on the periphery: familist, primitive and neoliberal articulation in the Chamber of Deputies" (2018) and the thesis by Camila Rocha (2018), "Less Marx, more Mises: agnesis of the Brazilian new right (2006-2018)", both in Portuguese.

<sup>11</sup> Since 2019, the term Bolsonaroist Bloc (*Bancada Bolsonaroista*) has been widely used by the media to denominate the group of deputies, normally from the PSL, in the legislative assemblies of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, which became consolidated as opposition blocs to the governments of Wilson Witzel (PSC) and João Dória (PSDB) respectively. Both the latter were elected as allies of Jair Bolsonaro, but during the first year of their governments they adopted an antagonistic stance to the then President of the Republic. This tension increased in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Among these 34 deputies, just Eduardo Bolsonaro and Police Chief Eder Mauro had held a mandate previously in the Chamber of Deputies, both elected to the 2015-2019 legislature. A total of 23 of this group were elected to a public post for the first time in 2018. Earlier, still under the influence of the institutional rupture generated by the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, three were elected to municipal legislatures in 2016: Carlos Jordy (Niterói/RJ), Filipe Barros (Londrina/PR) and Otoni de Paula (Rio de Janeiro/RJ). These three already stood out by their adoption of a set of issues championed by a more radical sector of the right. In their performances, they had also already adopted a more belligerent approach, very similar to what they would act out as a collective in the National Congress.

As well as a common set of issues, this group shares a confrontational performance based on a behavioural repertoire that, as hypothesized in this investigation, is being produced and consolidated in the current 2019-2023 legislature. Initially, the performance in the plenary session, on the commission and on social networks is what most calls attention as the element common to this group. Accompanying the National Congress in the current legislature, it was possible to note which agendas and kinds of events allow the group's movement to be identified and the paths along which they usually leave their traces.

While in his 27 years as a federal deputy Jair Bolsonaro was seen as an isolated figure, an outsider with no clearly defined links to any group or bloc, this group, for its part, very much shares an agenda, a style of doing politics, and is consolidating both a discourse and a collective performance. But although dynamic, this repertoire lacks any kind of coherence between its practitioners for them to be readily identifiable as a group. As emphasized earlier, this constant formation and transformation is part of the nature of groupings. The controversies that might otherwise hinder the identification of the group, contrary to what might be imagined, help shed light on the characteristics of the collective under study and its associations.

## **THE BATTLEFIELD: the parliamentary performance**

20 August 2019. After mobilizing a network of acquaintances, I obtained the contact of an employee from the Chamber of Deputies who, two years earlier, had completed her doctoral thesis on the legislative production of groups of neo-conservative deputies. She greeted me in her office and explained the current configuration of the Commission for Human Rights and Minorities (CDHM), which, she suggested, was an ideal venue to observe the activities of conservative groups in the Brazilian parliament. Unlike previous legislatures, the left-wing parties have currently lost majority control on the commission and although the Workers' Party (PT) still chairs the board, they no longer enjoy any advantage in the composition of the plenary. Due to her official position in the Chamber of Deputies, she apologized and advised me right away that she would be unable to mediate in any capacity. She could pass me some contacts, however. At this first meeting, I was told that the CDHM was being targeted by groups of conservative deputies and that their activities on the commission were marked by this latent feeling of retaliation.

The tension on the commission precedes the 56<sup>th</sup> legislature. One emblematic example took place in 2013 when the Evangelical pastor Marco Feliciano found himself at the centre of an episode widely reported in the media when he was elected president of the CDHM, nominated, at the time, by the Social Christian Party (PSC).<sup>12</sup> His election triggered a response from various groups campaigning for human rights, who staged a series of protests, hindering the start of the commission's work. Before this occurrence, the religious parliamentarians mainly acted in coordination behind the scenes (Antunes Filho, Mosca Pinezi & Jard da Silva, 2019; Barros, Bernardes & Pinto, 2018), less commonly making their arguments explicit in public speeches.

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<sup>12</sup> In Portuguese: *Partido Social Cristão*.

Also on 20 August, while accessing the profiles of the Bolsonaroist parliamentarians that I organized on Twitter, I saw a post being shared about the publication of a video with a red background and the announcement:

Figure 3: Post on the Twitter profile of Otoni de Paula (PSC/RJ)



The publication of this video on the YouTube channel of Otoni de Paula was linked in the post on the Rio deputy's Twitter profile, which contained the alert: THE BIGGEST ABERRATION PRODUCED BY THE LEFT! THEY WANT TO LEGALIZE INCEST AND ORGIES! This post was one of the elements that preceded a turbulent ordinary deliberative meeting of the Chamber of Deputies Commission for Human Rights and Minorities.

Using images transmitted by TV Câmara,<sup>13</sup> the video shows the deputy Otoni de Paula (PSC/RJ) on the pulpit of the plenary session of the Chamber of Deputies making an explosive speech and accompanied by a dramatic sound track worthy of a dubbed action movie trailer.<sup>14</sup> The video carries the signature watermark of the politician's Twitter account. A decontextualized speech by the deputy Orlando Silva (PCdoB<sup>15</sup>/SP), author of the law bill for the Twenty-First Century Family Statute, in which he asserts that "incest is a centuries-old taboo," is the starting point for the narrative construction and a hook for the discourse of Deputy Otoni de Paula in which he rails against the left and contends that the proposed bill is a risk to the family as an institution. The deputy Pastor Sargento Isidório (Avante/BA) emerges and stands behind Otoni de Paula with a copy of the Holy Bible held to his chest. The speech by the Rio deputy took place in the Ulysses Guimarães Plenary a few hours before publication of the video at 17:40:

Madam President, Honourable Deputies, I wish to call your attention to the greatest aberration that perhaps this Chamber has ever witnessed. Deputy Soraya, chair of this Commission, you are a mother. A mother! Honourable deputies from the left, the right, the centre, I believe one thing unites us here: the family. Because all of us have a family. Deputy Orlando Silva's bill is the greatest aberration this Nation has ever seen. And this isn't a religious argument, it's the argument of one parent to the other parents present in this plenary. Article 2 of the Twenty-First Family Statute states: "All forms of union between two or more persons are recognized as families..." Deputy Orlando Silva wants to legalize group sex [*suruba*]! He wants to legalize group sex! Anyone who wants group sex can go ahead, but don't transform that into a family! And there's more. This iniquitous bill states: "...which for this purpose is constituted by and based on love, socioaffectivity, irrespective" – note how absurd this is! – "of

<sup>13</sup> A Brazilian public TV network that broadcasts activities from the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies.

<sup>14</sup> The video can be watched at <https://youtu.be/PhnbHjTDS2A>.

<sup>15</sup> Communist Party of Brazil, *Partido Comunista do Brasil*.



consanguinity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, creed or race” – and pay attention to this bit! – “including their children or persons who considered to be such.” So in other words, if this bill is passed, a father will be able to marry his daughter, a son will be able to marry his mother. In the name of love. Deputy Orlando Silva, you are a father to a daughter. I wish to appeal to your good sense because I do not believe you have your own personal interests in this wretched bill that you’ve set before us (Chamber of Deputies, 2019a).

On the same day, in light of the repercussions of the attack on the law bill, a “note of clarification” was published on the website of the CDHM, signed by the president of the commission, Helder Salomão (PT/ES). This would be interpreted by the set of conservative deputies as a retreat by the left. A conservative victory.

Figure 4: Image published on the Twitter profile of Deputy Carla Zambelli



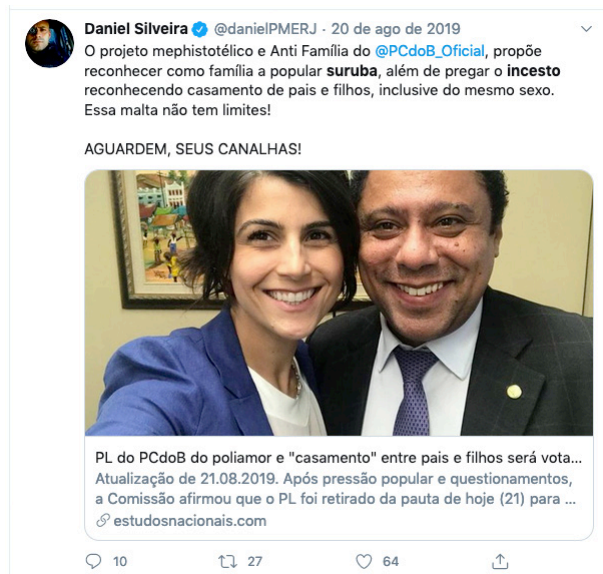
Before we explore the meeting in depth, a point should be made about the bill removed from the commission’s agenda and the only matter discussed that afternoon. Law Bill 3369/2015 sets out to implement the Twenty-First Century Families Statute. Its Article 2 served as a catalyst for the conservative reaction, including among the Bolsonaroists. The text recognizes as a family configuration the “union between two or more persons” irrespective of “consanguinity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, creed or race, including their children or persons considered to be such.”

21 August 2019. The day after the post. Ordinary deliberative meeting of the Commission for Human Rights and Minorities, Annex II, Plenary 9. Meeting scheduled for discussion of bills and voting. Venue full. Contrary to what I had imagined, present were, almost exclusively, registered Chamber professionals, advisors and a few journalists. No conservative activist groups had turned up, confounding my expectations.<sup>16</sup> My anticipation that these activists would attend stemmed from the fact that one of the bills on the agenda – the one highlighted in the post by Deputy Otoni de Paula – had made a big impact on social media on the eve of the meeting. Law Bill 3369/2015, introduced by Orlando Silva, the bill for the Twenty-First Century Family Statute, would be branded by conservatives as the Orgy and Incest Bill.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> This comment relates to the beginning of my research. Until March 2019, the focus of my doctoral investigation was on the actions of organized groups of conservative activists in the National Congress.

<sup>17</sup> The grouping calling itself conservative in the Chamber of Deputies is mainly represented by deputies from the Evangelical Bloc. This collective was the primary object of study in Tatiane Duarte’s ethnography, “‘The house of the wicked will crumble, but the tent of the righteous will flourish’: the participation of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front in the Brazilian legislature” (Duarte, 2011; original in Portuguese). Although every Bolsonaroist deputy calls themselves conservative, the opposite is not the case, not even as a category of accusation.

Figure 5: Screen capture of the post on Deputy Daniel Silveira's Twitter profile



Despite the absence of the public, the meeting was attended by a large number of parliamentarians and quickly attained the quorum needed for it to start. With all the seats occupied, I had to accompany the session standing. Some commission positions are essential to understand how the work is organized. We can begin with the chair of the commission, occupied by the Workers' Party (PT) in the figure of Deputy Helder Salomão, elected from Espírito Santo state. According to the Chamber of Deputies' regulations, the presidencies of the commissions and the places allocated to members and substitutes are distributed among the coalitions and parties, with the largest of these enjoying advantages in the choice of presidencies and the number of seats.<sup>18</sup> The vice-presidents of the commission are, first, Father João (PT/MG); second, Túlio Gadêlha (PDT<sup>19</sup>/PE); and third, Camilo Capiberibe (PSB/AP). 11 of the 18 seats making up the commission were from the PSL/PP/PSD/MDB/PL/REPUBLICANOS/DEM/PSDB/PTB/PSC/PMN coalition, four were taken by the PDT/PODE/SOLIDARIEDADE/PCdoB/PATRIOTA/CIDADANIA/PROS/AVANTE/PV/DC coalition and three by the PT/PSB/PSOL/REDE coalition.

To the right of the table where the commission's work is organized are concentrated the deputies from the conservative end of the spectrum. In the middle and to the left, the other deputies mix. At the start of the proceedings, Filipe Barros (PSL/PR) calls for a point of order, which, as he certifies, "precedes the reading of the minutes," as stated in the *Regimento da Casa*.<sup>20</sup> The deputy from Londrina, Paraná state, accuses the commission president Helder Salomão of failing to respect the agreements reached on the commission. According to his accusation, a pact exists concerning those bills that have failed to obtain a consensus among the commission's participants prior to the meeting: these should be officially withdrawn from the agenda with the aim of ensuring that voting on the set of law bills and motions occurs as smoothly and swiftly as possible. Barros accuses Salomão of failing to abide by this agreement. Sometimes, he claims, the president would re-present bills on which no consensus exists as a strategy for them to be passed with less resistance – a ruse intended to catch opponents of the bill by surprise. Having made his accusation, Filipe Barros tells the commission that the PSL

<sup>18</sup> The election of the Executive Board and the presidencies of the commissions and the organization of their work have been carefully analysed in the doctoral thesis by Luiz Eduardo Abreu, "The Labyrinths of the Minotaur" (see Abreu, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Democratic Labour Party, *Partido Democrático Trabalhista*.

<sup>20</sup> The use of the regulations as a strategic political instrument in the National Congress is an essential part of a parliamentarian's apprenticeship: "as well as establishing rules for the use of words, their institutional effects and a set of activities where words can be used in accordance with these rules, it also creates (and use of this term is not fortuitous) 'institutional quantities' such as budget allocations and posts" (Abreu, 1999). It also creates institutional qualities with a lawmaker's intervention the result of combining their political action with the possibilities afforded by the rules established in the internal regulations.

will block proceedings and highlights the issue of the day's business, the bill for the Twenty-First Century Family Statute, the "absurd bill of Deputy Orlando Silva, which legalizes incest and other aberrations." The Londrina deputy makes clear her group's disposition for conflict: "We wish to be respected and heard on this commission." The 'we' here is an allusion to the deputies from the right-wing and conservative end of the spectrum, who, according to Barros, are not heard and are treated differently in the meeting, while the left-wing parliamentarians are favoured by the president and by the commission's proceedings. At this moment, a left-right polarization is articulated. The final accusation in the Londrina deputy's speech concerns the note issued the previous day. In the parliamentarian's view, the commission's president had taken sides in the clash over the law bill, which was inappropriate for the person responsible for organizing its work in a technical and impartial form.

The floor is handed over to the deputy Police Chief Eder Mauro (then affiliated to the PSD<sup>21</sup>/PA, today the PL/PA). He declares in a raised voice: "I fully agree in kind (gender) ...and I mean gender in another sense<sup>22</sup> (...) everything here on this commission is about gender, it even worries me." The deputy Pastor Feliciano (PL/SP) contributes to the polemic and adds, speaking ironically in his deep gospel singer voice, "foodstuff" (*gênero alimentício*). Eder Mauro says that he is surprised about the withdrawal of Law Bill 3369/2015, introduced by the deputy from the PCdoB, "who isn't even present here," and who, according to the Pará politician, still in a raised voice, "is instituting the Orgy Statute of the Twenty-First Century Families, because this is an aberration brought before the Chamber of Deputies." The president Helder Salomão interrupts, asking for moderation in the use of language and suggests removing from the word *suruba* from the shorthand notes so as to "avoid lowering the level of the debate." Police Chief Eder Mauro, holding a printed copy of the bill, says mockingly: "What is the lower level is there than this bill, Mr President? The word I used, I think it was too polite even." He receives applause and maintains his strong and aggressive tone of voice.

It is unacceptable that a citizen such as this, **if one can call this Orlando a citizen**, wants the family... wants a father to be able to marry his daughter, the mother to marry her son, the sister to marry the dog... for the love of God, my brother. The entire Brazilian people need to know about this. And if that were not enough, now he has failed to turn up, certainly ashamed of what he did, he ordered the bill removed from discussion... ashamed (...) My people, we are here. Where are the left-wingers? Come here, let's vote on the bill! Put forward the bill, I want to see how this situation is going to play out. Those of you who like to raise the green, yellow, multicolour flag, come here and discuss the bill and we'll see who is going to triumph here, we'll see whether the people aren't going to win this issue of recognizing the family as a family and not as the absurdity he is suggesting here. (Deputy Eder Mauro at the meeting of the CDHM, 19 August 2019, my emphasis)

Deputy Lincoln Portela (then belonging to the Republicans/MG, now the PL) takes the floor and argues that the word *suruba* can be used, recalling its inclusion in the Portuguese dictionary. Turning to his colleagues on the right, he advises them: "You can say *suruba*, it's not a swear word." The commission president Helder again asks for removal of the word *suruba* from the shorthand notes.

<sup>21</sup> Social Democratic Party, *Partido Social Democrático*.

<sup>22</sup> TN: The idiomatic expression used here in Portuguese is *quero concordar em gênero, número e grau*, which literally translates as "I wish to agree in gender, number and degree," implying full agreement. The term *gênero* translates according to context as gender, genus, genre, kind or (food) product/commodity, hence the play on words in this reported exchange.

Standing up, Deputy Sóstenes Cavalcante (then DEM/RJ, now PL/RJ) converses with a deputy in his first term of office, David Miranda (then PSOL/RJ, now PDT/RJ). The former is on his second mandate, belongs to the Evangelical bloc and includes in his office, as an advisor, the psychologist Rozangela Justino, a leading figure in the activist movement surrounding the ‘Gay Cure’ project.<sup>23</sup> The novice deputy is an LGBT activist. The two men converse smiling. The president Helder attempts to get the session back on track.

Taking the floor, Túlio Gadêlha (then PDT/PE, now REDE<sup>24</sup>/PE) – the bill’s rapporteur on the commission – stresses that he has established cordial relations with parliamentarians from every part of the political spectrum and tells the meeting that it was his idea to withdraw the bill from the agenda. He recognizes that the text has problems in relation to its “legislative technique.” However, he argues that the bill, in essence, contemplates different family arrangements, such as, for instances, the cases of single mothers or a grandmother who lives alone with the son or grandson.

Deputy Orlando Silva (PCdoB) arrives at the plenary and asks the president to be able to speak as the bill’s author. Helder Salomão reminds the session that the regulations do not allow the author of the legislation to automatically precede the leaders of the parties or coalitions in this situation. Deputy Sóstenes Cavalcante offers to waive his right to speak first as a leader in order to listen to the author of the proposed bill. Deputy Orlando Silva, sat at the table where the commission’s work is organized, asks to speak first to respond to the criticisms from the parliamentarians and clear up the entire polemic: “I ask Marco Feliciano, my friend, who admires me so much... might he give way?” The deputy Pastor Marco Feliciano replies serenely: “Orlando, the fact is I’m going to cite you too.” Lots of deputies laugh. “Please, don’t misunderstand the word cite” (in Portuguese, *citar* also means to subpoena). The president Helder Salomão decides that there is no consensus. Police Chief Eder Mauro, wagging his finger, confirms there is none. Then Pastor Marco Feliciano, using his allotted time as leader, calmly makes the following pronouncement:

Mr President and honourable deputies, this meeting today is very important, including this debate, so that we can elucidate some facts. **First, I wish to demonstrate my deep respect for Deputy Orlando Silva, a deputy for a number of terms, we’ve been here working together for some time... and also for Deputy Túlio.** I told Túlio a short while ago that I’m a veteran... and he’s just arrived. [Túlio smiles.] He’s a freshman but a highly skilled freshman. (...) I remember very well when Deputy Orlando, there in the Chamber’s biggest plenary... he said jokingly – given they’ve approved the Family Statute now, I’m going to present the Modern Family Statute. I understood that this was said playfully, in a joking tone, and perhaps that is why the bill contains so many problems today. **It shows a poor legislative technique, a poor legislative technique in the construction of the text, as Túlio aptly put it here.** But what strikes me isn’t the interpretation of this or that: it’s how double standards exist in our country, including for progressive parties. (...) The bill was not twisted, you know that its poor legislative technique provided ample reason for a million thoughts (...) we understand that other family configurations exist, **the problem with this bill here, Orlando, is just the poor legislative technique. This allowed the precedent for us to have all this hubbub here** (Deputy Marco Feliciano in the meeting of the CDHM on 19 August 2019, my emphasis).

The deputy from the Evangelical Bloc Lincoln Portela echoes Sóstenes and waives his allotted time as leader so that Deputy Orlando Silva can speak first. The São Paulo parliamentarian confirms “the deep respect, and more than that, the **friendship** for almost everyone I know here” and states that “you cannot do politics without dialogue.” After this introduction, he defends himself and his bill. Police Chief Eder Mauro scowls and clutches a poster to his chest: “NO INCEST.”

<sup>23</sup> The case was reported by diverse media outlets, including Intercept Brasil: <https://theintercept.com/2017/09/19/autora-da-acao-da-cura-gay-tem-cargo-em-gabinete-de-deputado-evangelico/>

<sup>24</sup> Sustainability Network, *Rede Sustentabilidade*.

Lincoln Portela then takes the floor. From the Evangelical Bloc, a TV presenter, radio broadcaster and president of the Solidary Baptist Church. He calls himself a conservative.

**First, I wish to praise the patience and kindness of the president** (of the commission)... and praise the Orlando Silva's amenable demeanour. Even though I disagree with him completely and he knows so, he has a very amenable demeanour and is a great comrade... he is a colleague of mine, a comrade here in this Chamber, who I respect and with whom, in my local church, we once watched a match played by the Brazilian volley team and with him in my office, in my pastoral ministry (...) (Deputy Lincoln Portela in the meeting of the CDHM on 19 August 2019, my emphasis).

The Minas Gerais deputy goes on to criticize the *hermeneutics* of the bill and makes some observations about its *legislative technique*. The parliamentarian's speech is serene in tone. Next up, Deputy Sóstenes Cavalcante criticizes the bill harshly and claims that the text allows room for paedophilia, incest and marriage between three or more people. Filipe Barros takes the floor again. He announces that they will maintain their obstruction and that they will be able to extend it for up to six months:

We're going to obstruct the work of this commission until you finally respect people who think differently to yourself. (...) we have a majority on this commission and that's why we are telling you, Deputy Helder Salomão, that from today we want to be respected (Deputy Sóstenes Cavalcante in the meeting of the CDHM on 19 August 2019).

None of the bills or motions scheduled for the meeting were discussed; the contributions revolved solely around the bill removed from the agenda the day before, Law Bill 3369/2015, and criticisms relating to the organization of the commission's work and the left. The speeches continued until the Items on the Agenda were reached, when the deputies began to leave the meeting and head to the Ulysses Guimarães Plenary to register their attendance and take part in roll call voting. The presidency of the commission extended the meeting a little to hear the final parliamentarians listed to speak, Kátia Sastre (then PSL/SP, now PL/SP) and Chris Tonietto (then PSL/RJ, now PL/RJ). Neither woman is a member of the commission but they made use of their parliamentary right to speak and participate in the work of the commissions. Both made confrontational and aggressive speeches with the commission room already empty.

The São Paulo deputy is a serving military police officer and subsequently became known for responding to an armed assault at her daughter's school on her day off work, during a parent-teacher meeting, when she killed the assailant. A video of this killing was used at the start of her campaign to become a federal deputy, in 2018, until the Regional Electoral Court of São Paulo demanded its removal after determining that the electoral propaganda encouraged shooting people.<sup>25</sup> On the commission, the parliamentarian attacks the 'disgusting' bill, labelling it in favour of paedophilia and an attack on the 'family.'

Next, Chris Tonietto, a 'pro-life' (anti-abortion) Catholic activist, attacks the left and the bill. The following day, a video is published on a YouTube channel under the title "Conservative deputies quarrel with leftists who are in favour of INCEST between parents and children." The content features the Rio deputy and her colleague, Police Chief Eder Mauro. The video highlights the following part of the former deputy's speech, made at the end of the meeting in question.<sup>26</sup>

We know perfectly well what strategy they adopt. They want to manipulate semantics because they make use, for example, of the schools of Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, who talk very well of the manipulation of semantics, changing the meaning of words, and it's exactly what they say (...) so through semantic manipulations they impose

<sup>25</sup> The report was published by the newspaper *Estado de São Paulo* <https://politica.estadao.com.br/blogs/fausto-macedo/tribunal-suspende-propaganda-da-cabo-katia-matando-ladrao-a-tiros-na-porta-da-escola/>

<sup>26</sup> From the YouTube channel Política 100 Censura: <https://youtu.be/ToLWtVWLyLc>.

their interests and we know very well what these are, hidden interests, obscure even, intended to betray the good faith of others, and the families that assist us are being exposed to depravity right now (...) and this type of school of Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, post-structuralism will be buried here, we will make sure to unmask this moral garbage (Deputy Chris Tonietto at the meeting of the CDHM on 19 August 2019).

Figure 6: Screen capture of the video posted on the Política 100 Censura YouTube channel



At the end of the meeting, counting those lawmakers who exercised their right to speak as members or substitutes on the commission, leaders of parties or coalitions, four deputies declared support for the bill while another seven attacked the text. Initially, then, we can classify this polarization as a historic clash between deputies linked to the left of the political spectrum and parliamentarians positioned to the right. Taking into account the content involved in the debate, this confrontation can be analysed as conservative versus progressive.

Here I focus on the conservatives, the broader group with which the Bolsonaro group is associated. In a recent article, Marcos Quadros and Rafael Madeira (2018) describe a phenomenon they classify as a shift away from the “embarrassed right.” The authors argue that a change took place in the discourse of some parliamentarians in the Chamber of Deputies in the time span from the 1988 Constituent Assembly to 2018 – and especially after 2013 – with an intensification of the self-identification of deputies with the right of the political spectrum and conservatism.

Although in the speech cited at the start of this article Deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro mentions Pastor Marco Feliciano as an important element in his narrative on the right that the National Congress will now have to ‘swallow,’ it is important to stress that the parliamentary performances of the Bolsonaro deputies are strikingly different from the kind shown by Feliciano at the time of the Republicans, today the PL. Though clearly on the conservative end of the political spectrum, the pastor is a figure who, in his party career, has always been a member of coalitions, including sometimes forming part of the governing coalition of the two Dilma Rousseff administrations. His relational repertoire is closer to the behaviour predominant in the National Congress, which anticipates courteous treatment of parliamentary colleagues. Although there exist moments of fierce dispute involving political issues and clashes, these coexist with discursive elements that emphasize cordiality.

Courteous treatment is a hallmark still mostly present in relations between parliamentarians. This dynamic is described in the inaugural ethnography dedicated to Brazil’s National Congress, *Os Caminhos da Casa*, by Maria Cecília Costa, where the author presents the idea that “the politician’s ability in **legislative technique** is directly linked to their ability to establish personal relations” (my emphasis) with their peers: this, she wrote, was an important element of the *parliamentary art* (1980). Although disputes in parliament are severely unequal and

the clashes and debates frequently contain doses of animosity and aggression, most parliamentarians seek to establish a courteous familiarity. Indeed, it is common for their declarations to affirm friendship and fraternity among themselves. Although Pastor Marco Feliciano is one of the deputies who has most often campaigned against the left in diverse ways and hoisted the conservative flag in discourses in the plenary over the two previous legislatures, second only to then deputy Jair Bolsonaro (Quadros & Madeira, 2018), the lawmaker's approach differs from the behaviour repeatedly pursued by the Bolsonaroist deputies: the latter maintain a more latent and constant tension in the interactions observed during their parliamentary performances on commissions in the National Congress.

**Figure 7:** Screen capture of the post on the Twitter profile of Deputy Carla Zambelli



Returning to the analysis of the meeting, Feliciano's pattern of behaviour also applies to the deputies Lincoln Portela and Sóstenes Cavalcante, both from the Evangelical Bloc, known as fervent defenders of conservative agendas with a party history linked to the electoral base that ensured the coalition presidentialism after the 1988 Constituent Assembly (Abranches, 1988). By contrast, the behaviour of the deputies from the Bolsonaroist group exhibits a markedly disruptive performativity (Rocha 2018, Warner 2002). This is nonetheless somewhat adapted and dampened by the relational pattern of the Chamber of Deputies, which, in addition to the hallmark of courtesy, contains many elements of formalism, some set out in its regulations.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to think of the National Congress as a privileged space for the propagation of messages and images. Although, in the meeting analysed here, no advance had been made in the agenda and no voting had taken place on any bill or motion, the clash that afternoon had a series of repercussions: parliamentarians engaged in doing politics, produced content, connected with their public and maintained latent controversies that feed into their agendas. Although considerable prominence is given to parliament as a space for voting on and approving laws, the everyday world of the elected women and men is mostly taken up with many diverse engagements, whether public hearings, formal sessions or deliberative meetings, which leave traces and form part of the stages on which ideas are propagated and parliamentary performances are reiterated. Luiz Eduardo Abreu stresses that these activities, especially those of the commissions, acquire importance in the Legislature's routine by connecting with broader conflicts and alliances, whose interested and implicated parties are not limited "to the elected politicians, bureaucrats and/or technical staff, but involve diverse sectors of civil society, public opinion, other countries, foreign investors and so on" (Abreu, 1999). Thinking about

<sup>27</sup> Article 73 of Chapter 1 on Chamber Sessions in the Internal Regulations establishes the rules for maintaining the "order, respect and austerity of the sessions." Among the items listed, "no deputy will be allowed to speak without requesting permission to do so and without the President granting such" and when addressing a colleague "the deputy will address him or her with the appropriate courtesy title" (Chamber of Deputies, 2019b).

actions in the National Congress invites us to think about the wide scope of the events that mark the agenda of parliamentarians, including apparently less productive moments that are full of doing politics, even when deliberative sessions do not conclude with voting or with any progress being made in the legislative business at hand.

## POSSIBLE PATHS

Isabela Kalil in “Who are Jair Bolsonaro’s voters and what do they believe in?” (2018)<sup>28</sup> points out that the electorate that prevailed in 2018 is wide and diverse, not limited to a single profile or corresponding solely to the set of issues backed by the PSL’s candidate for the presidency. This observation helps us in a reading of the Bolsonarist Bloc, which also interacts with a broad and segmented public. These deputies are related to a wider range of elements than those represented by the now former president. Indeed, there are moments when, to maintain consistency vis-à-vis Bolsonarism, it may be necessary to ignore a presidential guideline on voting in the National Congress. In the name of governability, the Bolsonaro government was forced to negotiate with other political actors, principally members of the (in)famous *Centrão* or ‘Big Centre.’<sup>29</sup> These situations would seem to work against the anti-system image<sup>30</sup> promoted during the election campaign and that remains an important element for some of the public/supporters of Bolsonarism.

On 21 July 2020, a second round of voting approved Constitutional Amendment Proposal (PEC) 15/2020,<sup>31</sup> which introduced alterations to the Basic Education Development Fund (FUNDEB).<sup>32</sup> The leader of the government in the Chamber of Deputies at the time, Deputy Major Vitor Hugo (then PSL/GO, now PL/GO), and the Secretary of Government, General Ramos, campaigned against approval of the proposal throughout its passage through National Congress. Realizing they were set for defeat, however, they changed tack in an attempt to associate themselves to the victorious side. There were 499 votes in favour. The next day, the newspapers reported that the only votes against were from some Bolsonarist parliamentarians.

On the evening of 21 July, the deputies who, at that moment, called themselves “PSL / Alliance for Brazil” – namely, Bia Kicis (then PSL/DF, now PL/DF), Chris Tonietto (then PSL/RJ, now PL/RJ), Luiz Phillippe de Orleans e Bragança (then PSL/SP, now PL/SP) and Márcio Labre (then PSL/RJ, now PL/RJ) – held a live stream on YouTube called “WHY DID WE VOTE AGAINST THE FUNDEB PEC?” The crux of their argument was that voting in favour of the proposal would mean favouring a stronger State. As a group that advocates less state presence in people’s lives, these parliamentarians identify the public power as a real threat to the institution of the ‘family’ and ‘freedom.’ In terms of the educational agenda, the risks identified by this group are part of a broader set of concerns relating to the alleged indoctrination of children in schools. This theme lies at the core of the intentions of conservative lawmakers when it comes to projects like the ‘Party-Free School’ (*Escola sem Partido*) and regulations on home-schooling. Accompanying the range of arguments advanced by the set

28 TN: Original article title in Portuguese: “Quem são e no que acreditam os eleitores de Jair Bolsonaro.”

29 *Centrão* is the name given to a network of parliamentarians who lack any specific ideological orientation and to whom a more ‘physiological’ attitude is attributed. Irrespective of the government in power, this group seeks a relation of proximity and cooperation to influence the allocation of the public budget, the acquisition of funds, the destination of amendments of interest to their electoral bases, and the nomination of elected representatives to occupy public posts.

30 This anti-systemic emulation is identified by Fabiano Santos and Talita Tanscheit as one of the pillars of the ‘radical right,’ characterized by “hostility to the political system and to the form through which political representation is performed in the country, seeking to suppress opposing discourses and political parties” (Santos & Tanscheit, 2019) – as Isabela Kalil observed in her research with voters of Jair Bolsonaro, “against all the parties,’ ‘against all politicians,’ ‘against everything and everyone” (Kalil, 2018). These images, ideas and candidates are targeted at a public for whom any solution to contemporary problems lies outside the political system, thus presenting politicians who promote themselves as antagonistic to the “old politics” and to the “political system” (Almeida, 2019). In the case of Bolsonarism, this involves a universe of ideas whose main reference is a figure who in fact occupied a post in the Chamber of Deputies for seven consecutive legislatures, a clearly self-contradictory construct.

31 In Portuguese, *Proposta de Emenda à Constituição*.

32 In Portuguese, *Fundo de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica*.



of parliamentarians on their social networks, they all reinforce the idea that ultimately the group's position was to remain consistent with the set of ideas defended by Bolsonarism, which included the assertion that Jair Bolsonaro had voted against the PEC when he was a federal deputy.

Although Jair Bolsonaro kept his electoral base engaged and received more than 58 million votes in the second round of the 2022 presidential elections, the inconsistencies between the discourses and the actions demanded by the paths of governability ended up generating negative reactions from sectors of the Bolsonarist voter bases. Diverse episodes left them feeling obliged to take a stance in response to the inconsistency between the government's stated positions, actions and voting. One example of this sort of tension occurred with Deputy Carla Zambelli (PL/SP), who was questioned about using resources from the Electoral Fund, which she had pronounced against during the first years of the legislature. In the corridors of the Chamber of Deputies, it is common to hear the idea that a politician replying publicly to a criticism is a sign that he or she felt the blow.

Just as – based on the segmentation of Jair Bolsonaro's voters presented in Isabela Kalil's work (2018) – we can infer that Bolsonarism is a broader, more segmented and more complex political force than the set of issues defended by Jair Bolsonaro himself, so we can surmise that the Bolsonarist Bloc is linked to a symbolic universe with some autonomy from the existence of Bolsonaro and his government. Hence, deputies can create distinct connections with the different sectors of the large Bolsonarist voter base, enabling one parliamentarian to act focus more on radical groups of ruralists, while others maintain a stronger connection with pro-gun lobbies or with religious fundamentalists in their war against abortion under any circumstances, to cite some of the issues that mobilize them.

This more extensive character of Bolsonarism opens a range of possibilities for the future evolution and fate of this collective, leaving it for us to discover over the next few years whether the group will continue to thrive after the electoral defeat of Jair Bolsonaro in 2022 and, if so, whether it will carry on under the same label. Irrespective of the name it goes under, all the signs are that the far right occupied a space in Brazil's parliament, a fact we will be left to deal with for some time to come.

## THEMATIC BLOCS

The existence of cross-party thematic blocs in the National Congress is a phenomenon little investigated in Brazil's social sciences. The Evangelical Bloc, the Pro-Gun Bloc (*Bancada da Bala*) and the Ruralist Bloc are the most famous and have been the subject of investigations in doctoral theses and masters' dissertations.<sup>33</sup> In these studies, a recurrent ambiguity can be discerned in the use of two different typologies for the distinct groupings: the *frentes parlamentares* (parliamentary fronts or coalitions) and the *bancadas temáticas suprapartidárias* (cross-party thematic blocs) or *bancadas informais* (informal blocs). Nonetheless, crucial differences exist between these two types: the parliamentary coalitions are registered and possess a specific bureaucratic process for their recognition.<sup>34</sup> The thematic blocs, on the other hand, function without being formally registered and commonly refer to groups of parliamentarians who act in conjunction, while the coalitions are officially calculated using the signatures obtained for their creation and registration. It is worth stressing that although these groups work together, the degree of mobilization varies depending on circumstances. Moreover, within this associated set, the particularities of its members imply a heterogeneity in the group's internal composition. Accustomed

33 See Duarte, 2011; Faganello, 2015; Lacerda, 2018; Quadros & Madeira, 2018; Santana, 2016; Santos 2018.

34 The Act of the Board of the Chamber of Deputies n. 69 of 10/11/2015 created the register of Parliamentary Coalitions in the Chamber of Deputies, defining these as "a cross-party association of at least **one third of members of the Federal Legislature**, intended to promote the improvement of federal legislation for a particular sector of society" (my emphasis). The institutionalization of the coalitions allows the requirement to be made to utilize the physical space of the Chamber of Deputies and ensures that their activities are widely broadcast by TV Câmara, Rádio Câmara, Jornal da Câmara and on the Chamber of Deputies website.

to working with information produced by institutions or through the use of surveys, political science tends to perceive an “absence of public and widely available data” as an obstacle to the study of thematic blocs (Araújo & Silva, 2016). The dynamic and informal nature of these groupings implies a less rigid and less institutionalized object of study than, for example, the political party, an important and traditional topic in political science. In response to this difficulty, ethnography can offer an approach with the flexibility and precision needed to produce information on these types of collectives. Questions that can be investigated through field research include how these blocs emerge and act in political processes, considering their dynamics and their constant formation and transformation, whether in response to their internal dynamics or as a result of their relations with other groups, actors and institutions.

Another aspect that appears to be an obstacle to the examination of these phenomena of parliamentary organization – both the coalitions and the thematic blocs – is the fact that the questions and analyses of political science sometimes require verification of the effectiveness of the actions of these configurations vis-a-vis the decision-making of the National Congress as a whole. This confusion, linked to the search for generalizations, models of predictability that conceive of parliament as one big game, and a normative posture vis-à-vis the analysed political models of what democracy should be, seem to distance these kinds of investigations from the dilemmas experienced and confronted by the actors within their actual political contexts. These hallmarks of the analytic process become obstacles to understanding the everyday experience of parliamentarians in responding to challenges, which manifest in their experience as practical problems that are always contextualized: “As a result a problem is always a practical problem, **never a universal problem mattering for everybody**. Problems of the ecology of practices are also practical problems in this strong sense, that is problems for practitioners” (Stengers, 2013: 113). Following this idea, rather than seek to understand the effectiveness of strategies and organizations, it seems to make sense to follow the traces of the question that Suely Araújo herself poses in her article, where she reviews past studies and proposes a new agenda for research in the Brazilian parliament: “if the parliamentary coalitions and thematic blocs matter so little, which would seem to be implied by the scant attention given to them in legislative studies, why do the lawmakers insist in forming them?” (Araújo & Silva, 2015, 2016).

## **FINAL REMARKS: Parliament as a source of practices**

This article is part of a wider ethnographic investigation along the paths taken by the performances and practices of Brazilian federal lawmakers, which sees their activities as a key element in doing politics, taking a group of associated deputies as its starting point. Setting out from this group, the work involves accessing a network with heterogenic elements, focusing attention on the quality of these connections and the types of flows in which they are enveloped in particular circumstances and over a specific period of time. This investigation takes the Bolsonaroist Bloc as both a starting point and as its main analytic focus.

This aim in mind, it is important to work with a concept of network that allows this complexity to be approached, comprehending it as a set of heterogenous elements, which remain associated through social interactions that occur amid a range of events and circumstances (Strathern, 1996). In the case of this collective of Bolsonaroist deputies, it is important to consider the elements that make a difference in their specific way of doing politics, in their parliamentary activities, and that have impacts in the Chamber of Deputies. Among the components in action are: public workers employed in the National Congress; commissioned office-holders, party structures and party leaders; activists and mobilized groups; emoticons, memes and GIFs; executives at municipal, state and federal levels; the judiciary; regulations for the Chamber of Deputies and the National Congress; agendas for the commissions and plenaries; law bills and motions; and the press – here initially represented by the professionals, communications media and published reports. These and other potential

*mediators* – again using Bruno Latour’s term (Latour, 2012; Latour & Woolgar, 1997) – are all present in the parliamentary exercise and, in the case of the Bolsonarist deputies, can take on singular forms in terms of how this set of associations is realized and concretized as a collective practice.

In an approach to this network and these sets of action that considers power relations, it is important to understand how power is realized, how it happens, how a group manages to ensure its actions prevail against those of rivals, or how a group resists its actions being successfully countered. For this reason, it is interesting to extend the mapping of the network repercussions, describe these connections, and catalogue the elements associated in these actions.

As part of the search to understand and describe what makes a difference in this set of associations, this investigation deals with a diverse range of elements, believing that one possible way forward is to analyse this concatenation in flux, without organizing it in sections or categories, such as document analysis, social network analysis, discourse analysis and analysis of the deputies’ performance... The ethnographic challenge here is to shape the descriptive choices that best potentialize the exposition of the connected elements over the course of events and actions and best relate them as a continuous experience,<sup>35</sup> like the one we have seen in the day-to-day work of Brazil’s parliament.

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<sup>35</sup> An important consideration to be made here concerns the virtual elements of the network of deputies, especially those found on social networks. It is important to stress that this approach seeks to eschew an idea of *communication channels* in order to understand them instead as *relational spaces* (Segata, 2014). The current use and interaction with digital tools distance the proposed analysis from a split/boundary between online and offline life, my interest instead being to relate the path of associations and assemble their traces so as to assist in the understanding of these sets of action.

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# Government institutions and cultural models: learning about civil service in the recruitment of a bureaucratic elite

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the learning process of candidates in public selection exams for tax auditors in Brazil. Articulating cognitive theories of culture with anthropological studies of the state and its institutions, the author proposes the concept of a cultural model of civil service to explicate the standardized values and behaviours related to the bureaucratic-administrative practice that these institutions seek to instil in their agents. The aim is to show how the recruitment of a bureaucratic elite involves the incorporation of social representations concerning the role of state officials and the governmental legitimacy exercised in performing their function as auditors, even before the effective entry of these candidates into government institutions. The data is taken from ethnographic research conducted between 2015 and 2017 in Rio de Janeiro state, Brazil, which included participant observation in the classes of two preparatory courses for public selection exams.

**Key words:** Government institutions, civil service, public selection exams, cultural models, learning.

# Instituições governamentais e modelos culturais: aprendizados sobre serviço público no recrutamento de uma elite burocrática

## Resumo

Este artigo examina o processo de aprendizado de candidatos aos concursos públicos para auditor fiscal no Brasil. A partir de uma articulação entre teorias cognitivas da cultura e os estudos antropológicos sobre o estado e suas instituições, propõe-se o conceito de modelo cultural de serviço público para qualificar os valores e comportamentos padronizados relacionados ao fazer burocrático-administrativo que as instituições buscam impor aos seus agentes. Pretende-se mostrar como o recrutamento de uma elite burocrática envolve a incorporação de representações sociais sobre o papel dos agentes estatais e sobre a legitimidade governamental que estes exercem na função de fiscais, antes mesmo da efetiva entrada desses sujeitos nas instituições governamentais. Os dados são derivados de uma pesquisa etnográfica, conduzida entre os anos de 2015 e 2017 no Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, em que as aulas de dois cursos preparatórios para concursos públicos foram acompanhadas através de observação participante.

**Palavras-chave:** Instituições governamentais, serviço público, concurso público, modelos culturais, aprendizado.



# Government institutions and cultural models: learning about civil service in the recruitment of a bureaucratic elite

Bóris Maia

## Introduction

This article provides an ethnographic exploration of the learning process experienced by candidates for public selection exams to become tax auditors. It sets out to show how the recruitment of a Brazilian bureaucratic elite involves the incorporation of a cultural model of civil service that is disseminated among the candidates, especially in the context of preparatory courses frequented during their period of preparation for the selection processes. The incorporation of a cultural model of civil service during the recruitment phase of these civil servants demonstrates how government institutions produce social representations of both the role of their agents and the governmental legitimacy that they exercise in performing their function as state auditors, even before the effective entry of these candidates into the institutions in which they aim to work professionally.

By analysing the selection mechanisms of the Brazilian public administration, the study aligns with an anthropological approach interested in investigating the power dynamics through which the social order is continuously produced, valorising the processual nature of the phenomena involved in the functioning of the modern state (Miranda, 2005; Teixeira, Lobo & Abreu, 2019). Working from this perspective, the work also adds to anthropological studies on governance and public administration in the Brazilian context (Souza Lima & Teixeira, 2010; Castilho, Souza Lima & Teixeira, 2014).

The research focuses on the recruitment processes of the tax administration. Here I refer to the entire class of civil servants tasked with executing the administrative activities of tax inspection and collection for federal, state and municipal governments.<sup>1</sup> These tax auditors – *auditores fiscais* in Portuguese, with the same function also going by different names, depending on the public institution concerned, including *fiscal de renda*, *fiscal de receitas*, *fiscal de tributos*<sup>2</sup> and so on – comprise a bureaucratic elite of the Brazilian state consolidated since the colonial period, recognized with high salaries and a series of labour benefits not offered to other civil servants and professional sectors.

The theoretical approach that I privilege here in exploring the preparation for public selection exams comprises an intersection of two broader thematic fields of anthropology: an anthropology of the state, already briefly mentioned above, through which I seek to highlight the dynamic of state processes of training and recruitment; and an anthropology of knowledge, basically drawing from a branch of inquiry more interested in the discussion of cognition and learning, explained in more detail later. In fact, the focus on the preparation for public selection exams to some extent itself suggests this approximation, given that it foregrounds the learning of a form of *knowledge* pertaining to the *state*.

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<sup>1</sup> The federal government, states and municipalities have *competência tributária* or the constitutional authorization to create forms of taxation (such as taxes and duties).

<sup>2</sup> TN: Terms that can be translated as income inspector, revenue inspector and tax inspector, respectively.

The data I present here comes from an ethnographic research project conducted between 2015 and 2017 in Rio de Janeiro state, Brazil, in which I attended the classes of two preparatory courses for public selection exams for tax auditors. It is difficult to state with any certainty how many of these courses exist, but dozens exist in Rio de Janeiro alone. These courses are found throughout the whole of Brazil but show a higher presence in Rio de Janeiro and Brasília, the former and current federal capitals respectively, where there is a larger concentration of federal organizations. The courses have also disseminated through digital environments. Unlike schools, faculties and universities, the preparatory courses are not regulated by the Ministry of Education but comprise an educational structure that functions autonomously from the educational directives imposed by the Brazilian state.

Preparation for public selection exams in Brazil is increasingly segmented by career or area of interest, such as a career in tax auditing, banking, policing, courts, legal work, among other areas that delimit and correspond to a specific type of preparation. In the case of most careers, the biggest difference relates to the core of subjects that will be studied, the dynamic of preparation being fairly similar. As I remarked, my entry into this universe of preparation for professional exams took place through the courses and exams for tax administration. These selection exams occur with relative frequency given that all the Brazilian states and municipalities, as well as the federal government, can hold exams to recruit to their fiscal administrations. Among the candidates with whom I spent time during the research, it was common practice to travel to other states and municipalities to take public selection exams. This practice is so frequent among the candidates that tourist agencies exist specialized in this type of travel.

To be able to frequent the classes of the two courses that I accompanied, I was obliged to enrol myself, paying the corresponding enrolment and monthly fees. I attended approximately 450 hours of classes, including courses in law, accountancy, mathematical finance, logic reasoning and Portuguese. As well as direct observation in the classes, virtual environments and events, such as coaching lectures, specifically intended for candidates, I also interviewed diverse actors from the universe of selection exam preparation. I conducted four formal interviews with the business partners and founders of the two preparatory courses where I conducted my participant observation; two formal interviews with former coordinators of preparatory courses for a tax auditing career; and thirteen informal interviews with teachers and students, five with the former and eight with the latter. In the case of the teachers and students, however, most of the data came from conversations before and after classes and during breaks. All the interviews were in-person, though I only recorded the formal interviews with the business partners, founders and coordinators of the preparatory courses, which lasted around an hour and a half each.

## **Training state agents**

The processes of training and recruiting state agents, though receiving relatively scant attention in the anthropological literature on the modern state and its bureaucracies, show that the learning achieved during these processes contributes to the understanding of the institutional forms of power that emerge from the state phenomenon, combining diverse themes central to the agenda of the anthropology of the state and its administrative structures, including the cultural and symbolic dimension of power, the state training processes and the production of subjectivities. In this section, therefore, I shall explore a number of works that analyse training processes and practices implemented by or on behalf of government institutions.

In her study of human rights training programs offered to employees of the Turkish state as part of the process of the country joining the European Union, Babul (2012) has shown how these programs have transformed the social imaginary of the bureaucratic domain. As an effect of the policy agenda implemented during the accession process, agents of the Turkish bureaucracy have progressively altered the perception of

the basis of their governmental legitimacy. The new ranks of state officials now recognize their bureaucratic authority as a status acquired through educational achievement rather than as a status inherited from their class or family. Thinking of themselves today as originating from the people and elevated to positions of bureaucratic power on merit, state officials are also keen to distinguish themselves from the political elites, who neither originate from the people nor, generally, have risen to power through educational achievement or meritocracy.

Pieke (2009), for his part, conducted fieldwork in educational institutions teaching and training cadres of the Chinese Communist Party, analysing the strategies and narratives used by the party to achieve legitimacy in the contemporary Chinese context, increasingly characterized by the country's opening to capitalist globalization. The author shows how individuals need to undergo an ample learning process to become a party member, involving everything from mastery of a cultural, political and ideological knowledge to incorporation of the most prosaic body techniques, such as walking, speaking, eating and drinking in a specific way shared by party members. Pieke emphasizes that one of the aspects learnt during this training process is that the individuals joining the party's ranks begin to perceive themselves as different – and, obviously, superior – to other Chinese citizens.

A fundamental landmark in this area is the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1996) on preparatory classes for admission exams (*concours*) to the grand French écoles. The author treats these preparatory classes as means to access the cognitive structures that the actors apply to social life. Bourdieu calls these educational institutions an “immense cognitive machine,” since it is through their structure, and the teaching effected in them, that schemas are inculcated which organise the perceptions, appreciations and actions of the agents submitted to them. The preparatory classes tend to produce a homogeneity of mental structures (schemas) in the subjects that frequent them, which creates, in the author's words, an ‘*esprit de corps*’ and a ‘shared culture.’ These standardized schemas of perception, appreciation and action are the embodied form of the habitus that the institutions imprint on the agents through their pedagogical action.

Various anthropological works on government institutions in Brazil reveal how training and recruitment practices affect the institutional routine of different sectors of public administration. In an ethnographic study of careers and socialization in Brazilian diplomacy, Moura (2007) calls attention to the ‘*esprit de corps*’ instilled in the candidates by the selection exams for entering the diplomatic career. Kant de Lima (2011) suggests that public selection exams for the law area cause those who pass to feel chosen and anointed to take their decisions without being accountable to other citizens, given that the preparation for the selection process requires access to a particularized knowledge unavailable in the university market.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile the research of Miranda (2015) on tax auditors indicated that the candidates for the post frequented preparatory courses on which they came into contact with numerous auditors who worked as teachers and came to identify with them – an identification that was already effectively part of the selection process that would culminate with the public selection exams.

This literature presents at least two common findings on the dynamic of the state processes of training and recruiting staff for government institutions. First, it shows the importance of recognizing the effort that these institutions make to project their values and beliefs through pedagogical practices with individuals who are still only potential state officials. As a corollary, we can affirm that the ethnography of government institutions gains in explanatory power by including the institutional training and recruitment processes in its scope of analysis, since it is through these procedures that the actors involved will adhere to or tacitly accept – while others desist from – an institutional culture that will henceforth guide their bureaucratic practice.

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3 Preparation for selection exams in the legal area has also been studied by Fontainha (2011), Orban (2001) and Passos (2019).

Second, it becomes clear how the bases of governmental legitimacy that these actors come to attribute to themselves are constructed in opposition to other social groups who are conceived to lack certain predicates now identified as necessary for belonging to the state bureaucracy.

These findings persuaded me to attempt to conceptually qualify this gradual process through which the actors incorporate both a set of representations concerning state institutions and a feeling of belonging to (and deserving) state employment. Elsewhere (Maia, 2019, 2020) I have referred to this double internalization of postulates relating to civil service *bureaucratic subjection*, which involves, on one hand, an identification of the self with public careers and, on the other, a legitimization of propositions concerning the cultural model of civil servants and their enjoyment of bureaucratic power. Bureaucratic subjection involves an embodiment of the state's authority, which gradually transforms individuals, previously candidates for civil service, into state subjects.

In my view, therefore, investigations into the functioning of state practices and dynamics can gain analytically by taking into account the process of bureaucratic subjection that each government institution provides to its civil servants. This implies not limiting the ethnographic study of institutions to analyses of the institutional roles performed by actors in their everyday work or the formal structures (arranged in organisational charts) that govern the relationship between these roles. This kind of analysis is incapable of explaining either the motivation of the actors to become part of the institution, or the set of representations that these actors bring with them concerning the institutional roles they should perform. As Abélès (1995) stressed, an anthropological approach to the study of institutions cannot consider them solely based on their formal structure: it must also analyse the representations that the actors manifest in their day-to-day activities, which are often at odds with the formal structure and with the official discourses of those at the top of the organisation.

In this article I wish to explore one of the two aspects of bureaucratic subjection mentioned above, namely the assimilation of a set of conceptions about civil service and, more specifically, about civil servants themselves. I set out from the idea that all bureaucratic subjection entails the internalization of cultural schemas that structure a model of the civil servant disseminated among the members of a particular institution. Here, therefore, my intention is to make evident the articulation between bureaucratic subjection and cultural models of civil service by exploring the preparation of candidates for public selection exams for entry to the fiscal administration in Brazil.

## **Institutions and their cultures**

State processes for training and recruiting bureaucratic personnel provide a point of access for the anthropological study of power practices that reveal the cultural dimension of the state (Steinmetz, 1999): in other words, they show how diverse power mechanisms become symbolically instituted and justified for the state officials themselves and for the wider public. This includes revealing how conceptions of civil service are locally produced for each nation state, which are subject to large variations, as Abélès and Jeudy (1997) have already highlighted in reference to Europe.

Along the same lines, Bellier (1997) pointed out that the analysis of representations and cultural forms are an integral part of an anthropological approach to institutions, insofar as institutions and their agents produce culture and enable a comprehension of the culture of the society in which they are embedded. The author also emphasizes that the ethnographic study of the culture of institutions becomes relevant due to the propensity that the agents of these institutions have to think of themselves as part of singular culture. In other words, the individuals who participate in an institution frequently recognise that they share a sense

of belonging and an institutional ethos with their peers. Bellier calls this set of attitudes and behaviours an administrative culture that the institutions attempt to impose on their officials to make them amenable to their institutional proposals.

The concern with the shaping of an institutional identity has already been extensively described in the literature on government institutions in Brazil. From the 1930s, there was a widespread endeavour in the country to create institutions that represented themselves as technical bureaucratic elites, recruiting their staff through meritocratic and impersonal procedures and no longer through cronyism and patronage (Wahrlich, 1983). Some of the institutions that emerged during this period constructed their identities around these postulates, like the former Civil Service Administrative Department (DASP),<sup>4</sup> whose employees thought of themselves as ‘experts’ in civil service (Rabelo, 2013) and the now equally defunct Industrial Workers Retirement and Pension Institute (IAPI),<sup>5</sup> which possessed a corps of officials calling themselves the ‘cardinals’ of social security (Hochman, 1992). In the area of tax policy, tax auditors were already known as ‘princes of the state’ and ‘business partners of the state,’ since they collected taxes for the government and received a percentage on top of any fines levied (Miranda, 2015).

By contrast, other institutions may feel the lack of a well-defined institutional identity. Teixeira and Lobo (2018) report how the staff of the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA)<sup>6</sup> pointed to an identity crisis in the institution, the result of tensions and disputes related to different understandings of what research should be undertaken in support of government initiatives. In the context of public security institutions, some studies on municipal guards identified that the agents working for these organisations often expressed the sense of a lack of institutional identity, caused among other actors by the difficulty of distinguishing their role as guards from the work of the military police in maintaining public order (Mello, 2011; Rocha, 2017).

All this concern with the presence or absence of an institutional culture in the sphere of public administration reveals how the professional identities of public officials are subject to symbolic elaborations, which affirm and contest the meanings attributed to government actions and to their legitimacy, in a power dynamic that defines the institutional targets to be collectively pursued. Along these lines, reflecting on the uses of the culture concept in organisational and anthropological studies, Susan Wright (2004) calls attention to organisations as bodies capable not only of constructing a set of ideas shared among their members, but above all of authorizing certain discourses through political processes that are internally embedded in the institutions. Wright suggests that the culture concept, imagined as a political process of imposing meanings on groups, ideas and things, as well as contesting them, is an important analytic tool for the anthropological study of organisations.

As we have briefly been able to see, various themes and concepts – institutional ethos, institutional culture, administrative culture, organisational culture, habitus – have already been invoked in the quest to describe a set of values and behaviours with which institutions identify and attempt to socialize their agents. These analytic categories show the influence that government institutions possess in forming the “thinking styles” of their agents, to use the terms of Mary Douglas (1987), which sustain particular patterns of social interactions and naturalize distinct forms of classifying persons and their relations. Douglas also emphasizes that institutional stability is directly related to the capacity of organisations to impose thinking styles on their agents, insofar as the classificatory systems contained in these styles become stable, along with the institutional order from which they are derived.

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4 *Departamento Administrativo do Serviço Público.*

5 *Instituto de Aposentadorias e Pensões dos Industriários.*

6 *Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada.*

It seems clear, then, that the operational dynamic of government institutions occasions a discussion on the relation between cognition, culture and learning. This is the path I explore from the next section on, incorporating a theoretical framework linked to cognitive anthropology, the branch of anthropology that has dedicated itself more systematically to the investigation of cognitive phenomena in the constitution of culture.

### Learning schemas and cultural models

To analyse the learning achieved by the candidates involved in the preparation for public selection exams for fiscal administration, I mobilize two key concepts from contemporary cognitive anthropology, the notions of *schema* and *cultural models*. The selection exam preparation process I am investigating promotes two kinds of learning: one kind that is linked to the techniques and content taught by the teachers to ensure that the students perform well in the selection exams, as I have explored elsewhere (Maia, 2021a); and another kind that revolves around the introjection of values and behaviours concerning the social position they will occupy once they pass the exam. The latter entails learning a series of propositions about civil service, henceforth described as *schemas*, which, when connected together, form a cultural model of civil service that becomes incorporated by the candidates through the socialization of the agents involved in the preparation for the exams, especially teachers and students – both groups in many cases containing people who are already civil servants.

The schema theory was appropriated from cognitive psychology by anthropologists working in the field of cognitive anthropology in order to rethink cultural phenomena. A schema can be understood as a generic version of aspects of the world resulting from successive similar experiences of subjects. When people share the same experiences, they tend to share the same cultural schemas, abstract representations of regularities of the environment in which they interact. Thus, Roy D'Andrade (1987) considers schemas as an abstract organisation of experience that is intersubjectively shared, naturalizing the information and interpretations of the world to which they refer. Schemas aim to explain not just the knowledge that people share but also how they are learnt during experience and organised in the human mind (Quinn, 2005). Our understanding of happenings in the world depends on the activation of previously incorporated schemas, based on common experiences, that are continually elaborated (D'Andrade, 1995).

It is important to emphasize that the term schema appears recurrently in much of social theory, but here acquires a much more specific meaning. One of its best-known uses is found in the works of Pierre Bourdieu. Hence, by way of example, it is worth highlighting the difference between the idea of schema used by Bourdieu (1972) to define the habitus and the theory of the schema employed in the context of cognitive anthropology, which is the definition I am using here. The central concept developed by Bourdieu to explain the relation between structures and the subjectivity of agents, without reducing one to the other, is that of habitus, which comprises a set of dispositions incorporated in practice by agents through their social relations. These *schemas* of perception and action, as the author states, end up internalizing in the subject the social structures within which they are inserted and are subsequently externalized by the same subjects, meaning that they tend to reproduce the social structures through internalized cognitive structures (schemas). So, for Bourdieu, agents act in accordance with the cognitive structures acquired in practice, that is, the schemas of perception and action incorporated in the form of a specific habitus.

Bourdieu's theoretical model includes various shares concerns with the model adopted here. It also constitutes an attempt to analyse the internalization of sociocultural knowledge, taken as flexible understandings adaptable to practical situations, which diverge from the view of social life as a phenomenon regulated by invariable rules incorporated by agents. However, as Quinn and Strauss (1997) argue, Bourdieu's use of embodied knowledge, the habitus, ignores the role of motivation and emotion as a force of reproduction, standardization, diversity and change in social life, as well as the role of deliberate teaching in the forming of schemas.

In relation to the latter aspect, Bourdieu assumes that familiarity with social practices is sufficient to explain the internalization of their regular elements. The authors, by contrast, argue that not all the regularities observed in practice are retained equally in the internalized schemas since the learner's motivation makes a difference in terms of the attention given and, consequently, whether the experience will be cognitively processed and whether he or she will adhere to the set of previously acquired knowledge. In a similar critique of the theory of cognition contained in the concept of habitus, Bloch (1985) stresses that Bourdieu postulates a learning process characterized by a single form of acquiring knowledge, which fails to explain the diverse types of knowledge possessed by subjects.<sup>7</sup>

While Bourdieu thinks of schemas in association with the constitution of a habitus, I shall follow various authors linked to cognitive anthropology and associate the notion of schema with the concept of *cultural models*. Setting out from a cognitive theory of culture, cultural models were conceived as schemas widely shared through experience by social groups, at varying scales, and that perform a vital role in their understanding of the world and how they behave within it (Holland & Quinn, 1987; D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992). Cultural models provide a frame for experience, interpretations of it and inferences about it, as well as goals and motivations for the action of subjects (Lutz, 1987; Strauss, 1992). Differently to the notion of habitus, cultural models are a theoretical construct that attempts to specify how shared knowledge is structured through associated smaller units of understanding (the schemas), which are connected in a network through the activation proportioned by the experiences of agents in the world. To the extent that these networks of mental contents are diffused among a significant part of the population, or of a social group, and continue over time, albeit with occasional changes, we can speak of the establishment of a cultural model related to a specific sphere of social life (Feltes, 2018).

As well as being specific to a narrower or broader social group, cultural models are frequently prescriptive. According to Holland and Quinn (1987), one of the main contributions of cognitive anthropology is its elucidation of the conditions under which cultural models are imbued with a directive force, consequently acquiring an ideological potential. By ideological, I refer here to cultural models with a normative character, a prescription of how the things to which it refers should be. Although bus drivers in São Paulo may share a set of cultural schemas about surfers in Santa Catarina (predominantly white males, young and middle class, for example), they do not generally have a set of prescriptions concerning what the behaviour of these surfers should be. On the other hand, students from public schools in Rio de Janeiro do possess a set of ideas about how a teacher should behave if he or she is to be categorized as a 'good teacher' (Maia, 2017). At work, in this case, is a prescriptive cultural model incorporated by students concerning the teacher's role.

It also seems important to mention that cultural models have already been utilized to account for diverse processes of social identification. Kronenfeld (2008) emphasized that cultural models work to create in agents a feeling of belonging to groups and other social entities, like government institutions. In a study on the cognitive basis of terrorist practice, Sieck (2011) described what he defined as a Sunni Jihadist cultural model of political relations. The author argues that the recruitment of common persons to the causes of Jihadist organisations is achieved by adapting the ideas of these groups to the system of cultural references of their target public, who thereby come to frame a series of events and facts from a Jihadist perspective, with which they then also gradually develop an identification.

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<sup>7</sup> Analysing the learning of practical and everyday tasks, the author also argued that the type of learning mobilized in social life is directly related to the nature of the knowledge being acquired. Bloch (1991) differentiates between two types of knowledge, *linguistic* and *non-linguistic*. Practical activities and tasks depend on a non-linguistic knowledge in order for them to be executed well. Their effective execution presumes that they are embodied through automatisms. Linguistic knowledge, by contrast, necessarily involves the explicit transmission of meanings and communication through a propositional language.

The notions of schema and cultural model, as elaborated in the cognitive anthropological approach, thus offer an analytic key for us to comprehend the dynamic through which cognitive structures form and function as the basis of ideas, values and behaviours manifested by agents in everyday life. This includes the apprenticeships that government institutions provide to their employees and the feeling of institutional belonging itself that the latter frequently end up expressing.

Along these lines, during the preparations for the public selections exams for the fiscal administration, by establishing a distinction between civil servants and other professional sectors of Brazilian society, the pedagogical agents also end up attributing qualities to civil servants and to the 'others' with whom they are contrasted. This set of qualities involves ideas and concepts relating to the role and prerogatives of the public worker, which, when combined, form what we can call a *cultural model of civil service*. The pedagogical agents also provide a series of indications to the students about what is right and what is inevitable in civil service, generating a prescriptive cultural model that becomes one of the implicit effects of the learning process.

To delineate this cultural model of civil service captured through the preparation for selection exams, I shall present various cultural schemas associated with the idea of the public worker and shared during the experience gained by the subjects on the preparatory courses and already mobilized by them during the period of selection exam preparation. The schemas that I describe here are not exhaustive in terms of defining the cultural models of civil service that the subjects have absorbed, only those that I was able to map on the basis of my fieldwork in preparatory courses for fiscal administration selection exams. Indeed, as Holland and Quinn (1987) warned, the sharing of cultural models does not necessarily preclude alternative cultural models and schemas referring to the same social domain as the former. In any event, what follows are some schemas widespread among the candidates preparing for the selection exams.

#### Schema 1: civil service as distinction and enjoyment

From this section on, I shall begin to present more directly the ethnographic data obtained from my fieldwork in preparatory courses for public selection exams in the cities of Niterói and Rio de Janeiro. During the classes I attended and in the interviews I conducted, the keenly desired acceptance in the selection exam was a frequent topic in the talk of the course teachers. It appeared in the discourse of these candidates as an achievement that would make possible their social distinction and enable their personal ambitions to be attained. On the other hand, the emphasis on the work to be performed was always limited and generally the work itself was mentioned in a negative tone, while the advantages arising from it were repeatedly lauded. Hence, it was common for teachers to describe the work routine of the future public employees as time spent responding to small formal demands, whose completion would require little effort, allowing the enjoyment of other activities, such as those associated with leisure, as can be noted in the remarks of the Administrative Law teacher on one of the courses:

Things don't happen overnight, guys. If you want to be an auditor, you won't pass the exam by sleeping all morning and then heading to the beach in the afternoon. After, when you've passed, you can visit the beach every day. But not beforehand. Afterwards you can arrive at ten in the morning, there's none of that business of set work hours. You leave for lunch at one. At two thirty you're back. It's already getting late. Look at the traffic. Grab your bag and leave. And the workday is over, in an honest form.

As her remarks clearly express, reproducing an idea widespread among Brazilians that the civil servant 'does nothing,' the moment of preparation for the selection exams is taken as the opposite of the post-acceptance moment. The former demands a high level of dedication and effort, considered by students and teachers alike as a sacrifice. In the first class of one of the courses I frequented, the mathematics teacher immediately



forewarned the students that preparation for the selection exams would be a period of “much sacrifice and effort” but the payback would come after they passed. The teacher added that those who fail to pass the exam do so because they are ‘lazy,’ meaning these individuals will have to find some “small job or other.”

Many began to study with such intensity that they ceased to socialize with friends or significantly reduced the frequency of their interactions, even with family members. In one of the conversations with a group of students during the break, one of them said that those starting the preparation for the selection exam still had no idea what the pace of study should be like. According to him, passing the selection exam demands “living for the selection exam.” That means “being without friends” and “having no fun,” dedicating oneself solely to study every day of the week. Studying at weekends was one of the main examples cited to show how self-sacrifice was needed during their preparation. “The selection exam candidates [*concurseiros*] don’t have weekends,” they said. The days theoretically assigned as rest days were transformed into study days.

All this effort, however, would give way to moments of enjoyment once the subjects became civil servants. In line with this perception of work as enjoyment, I often heard students and teachers make projections concerning what their lives would be like after passing the exam. In the interval to one of the classes, while I was chatting with two of my interlocutors in front of the building where the course was run, an imported car drove past, attracting attention from pedestrians on the sidewalk, including us. One of the students remarked: “Hey bro, that guy there definitely passed the exam. My time will come too.”

The teachers cited even more unusual examples. The Administrative Law teacher from one of the courses told students from his class that after passing the tax auditor exam, they could travel to France spending less than a third of the salary that they would earn. Another teacher, also from the law area, who as well as being a teacher was a state judge, said that “thanks to the public selection exam” he had bought a private island, just like the TV presenter and one of the country’s most famous celebrities, Luciano Huck.

I was able to accompany one student, Rodrigo, who took one of the courses that I accompanied and passed the selection exam in first place. He visited the course to pass on the news to his colleagues and teachers. He appeared at the end of the Logical Reasoning class and went over to thank the teacher for the classes. Soon a queue of classmates formed to congratulate Rodrigo for passing the exam. The teacher asked how he was feeling and said that his life would change forever. Rodrigo said that he was relieved and happy, and added that he would now be able to win all the women he wanted. The teacher laughed and agreed with the future civil servant, saying farewell to him by advising him to enjoy the new-found advantages to the full. In relation to this episode, I stress that it was not a private conversation. It occurred in the classroom with many of the class listening and responding to what was said by the teacher and by the recently-approved candidate.

It is also important to say that most of the candidates who frequented the courses I accompanied had only a vague idea of the activities that they would perform in their day-to-day work as future auditors. They were, however, very attuned to the labour benefits that a tax auditor enjoys, such as the amount of salaries, bonuses and additional pay-outs, the workload, and the flexibility to establish their own work schedule, among other benefits. Conversations between students often revolved around this theme. In the break of one of the classes, when I would go with the course students to a nearby café, one of them brought his class colleagues up-to-date about the selection exams that were now open, as was the custom, and listed the advantages and disadvantages of each. He mentioned a selection exam for the Military Justice, saying that “the salary isn’t bad” – somewhere between ten and twelve thousand reais a month – and that a woman he knew who worked for the entity was able to spend various days off work at home.

During the classes, the teachers also constantly alerted students to the advantages of certain posts. After calling the class’s attention to the federal agency selection exams in his class, the Mathematical Finance teacher stated that the best exam for someone who wants an ‘easy life’ is the

ANCINE<sup>8</sup> exam: “ANCINE is perfect. You pocket the money and do nothing. It’s perfect. You’ll only go there to watch movies for the rest of your life, you scoundrel. [laughing]” Another teacher, when someone complained about the dedication need to pass the exam, would say by way of motivation: “Think about the pay cheque! Think about the pay cheque!”

These ethnographic examples show how the access to material and symbolic goods and a way of life associated with the elites is a schema linked to the cultural model of civil service propagated by the teachers and internalized by the students during their preparation for the fiscal administration selection exams.

## Schema 2: knowledge of practice is learnt in practice

A second type of schema that connects with the idea of a civil servant concerns the knowledge of practice, in contrast to exam knowledge. At the start of their preparation for public selection exams, the students have no doubt about the importance of learning the course content for the exams they are set to face. However, this apprenticeship is combined with another, which concerns the provisional and ephemeral nature of the knowledge to be tested in the exams. After the exams are over, the knowledge learnt will have no use in the subsequent life of the civil servant, if and when they pass.

In one of the first classes that I accompanied, after the Tax Law teacher had explained the legislation that would be studied during the course, a student asked whether he would discuss a specific decree during the class. The teacher told her no since the decree in question would not feature in the exam. The student persisted, saying that the decree concerned questions that tax auditors deal with in day-to-day work. The teacher then advised: “just because he sees this in practice, does it have to appear in the exam? That’s not how it works!”

This type of warning calls attention to the difference between the knowledge tested in the exams and the knowledge needed to perform bureaucratic functions, as Miranda (2015) has already observed in the discourse of Federal Revenue tax auditors. This issue was also emphasized in an interview with the pedagogical director of one of the preparatory courses:

Not all the program content is focused especially on the post. So, in reality, the Revenue auditor does not need to know twenty-five subjects. It’s not needed to perform his job. Obviously, there are courses that he may need. Accountancy, Tax Law... But he definitely doesn’t need all of them and not in so much depth in some of them.

Before starting to teach some of the content from their courses, some teachers would tell the class that the material would be useless in the day-to-day exercise of the professional activity they were seeking to enter. Explaining the so-called personalist theory of accountancy, for example, the course teacher said:

And today in Brazil, does the personalist theory or the patrimonialism theory hold good? The patrimonialism. But can the former appear on the exam. Sure. So you have to know it. Will you use this when you’re there at the Federal Revenue, working as an auditor or a technician? Will you use this bullshit there? No, but you need to know it to be able to get there. Unfortunately you will need to know it.

As I discussed earlier, while part of the knowledge acquired on the preparatory courses is characterized as practical knowledge for the exams, it is no more than theoretical knowledge, entirely lacking in practical utility after the selection process. Along these lines, the Information Technology teacher for one of the courses told the class: “IT for exams is this here. There are lots of people teaching students how to mess with the computer. I teach them how to pass the exam.”

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<sup>8</sup> The National Film Agency (ANCINE) is a federal regulatory agency, whose objective is to promote, regulate and supervise the national cinematographic and videophonographic industry.

One of the reasons why most of the content learnt becomes momentaneous is the fact that this mode of knowledge acquisition involves a medium and long-term process of forgetting. This was pointed out by various students who frequented the courses I accompanied. Some had already studied various contents for previous exams they took, but added that, after they interrupted their studies, almost everything was quickly forgotten. The teachers also emphasize that studying should be continuous: if not, even in a short while, remembering the taught material will prove impossible. During the Coaching Day event, an auditor from Rio de Janeiro gave his views on this aspect of the knowledge tested in the exam:

Knowledge for the exam, folks, is a flash memory. Many people may say that it's long-term, but it isn't. Flash memory in IT is rotary memory, it's not the HD. You're not storing long-term memory. Lots of things are flash memory, in two or three weeks you won't remember a thing. That's what happened with me. I thought I would never forget so many of the things that I studied so hard, I was going to be the best Tax Law auditor in the world. After a month I was rereading the Tax Law book. Because you forget.

During the preparatory process, the provisional naturalization of this knowledge is incorporated by the apprentices. The majority of the teachers and students do not question the content taught, save for complaining about the amount of material, especially the students, but never about its usefulness for the public posts and jobs they will perform if they pass the exams. However, some business partners and directors of preparatory courses did declare in interview that it would be better were the knowledge tested in the exam actually useful for the candidate's future work. At the same time, though, they expressed resignation since they considered this idea infeasible, given that it would depend on ranking the scores of the potential approved candidates:

They should only test for what the job concerned demands. Yes, but would the selection panel be able to select by only testing for what the job demands? I don't know the answer. I myself don't have the answer. If the panel only tested those concepts that the job demands, would it be able to separate the guys and create a list of one by one, would it manage to create tiebreak criteria, create a list of approved candidates to submit to the organisation concerned? (Preparatory course business partner).

It would be excellent if the candidate were required to know only what is needed for the job, since it would be an advantage for the candidate and for the State, which would have a guy with a lot of knowledge exclusively about those matters inherent to his job. It wouldn't be bad. The problem is the selection process. The problem is whether you can manage to make an exam differentiating these guys. What ends up happening is that you oblige the candidate to study much more than he would need to perform the job. (Pedagogical director of a preparatory course)

This recognition that the content of the exams is not necessarily linked to the knowledge needed for civil service and that it will be disposable once the candidate transforms into a civil servant highlights the fact that the selection processes do not necessarily select the candidates best prepared for the future bureaucratic tasks. Making this point, one of the pedagogical agents most critical of the selection process for public selection exams with whom I talked considered that the knowledge demanded ends up favouring a certain type of candidate:

A study was once undertaken that showed the following: the selection process contains various flaws that mean people can answer questions relating to Law, including Criminal Law, Tax Law and Civil Law, but when it comes to making a decision using the knowledge in day-to-day situations, they fail to show the same brilliance. That's what we say: the difference between competence and content. If I am concerned about what year Brazil was discovered, I'm going to select a certain type of candidate. Not that he's stupid; that's not the problem. But he has a certain kind of preparation focused more on memorization. He might even be an excellent problem solver if he were trained to reason rather than memorize. While the fellow who does have a good decision-making capacity may be put off by having to learn an absurd mass of information. He wants the information to be useful. Rather than worrying about retaining all the content of a Barsa [encyclopaedia], he only wants to know about something that has a concrete application.

The choice of a certain type of candidate obviously implies the valorisation of one model of employee for civil service. In this sense, the experience of subjects as apprentices on the preparatory courses is an updated version of the traditional model of a generalist and theoretical employee prevalent when the current model of the public selection exam was conceived in the 1930s (Maia, 2021b). The selection method promoted during this period of the early twentieth century ended up transforming into the model adopted for all public selection exams in the country, based on objective theoretical tests that combined general and specific knowledge. This model favoured the entry of generalist civil servants, although selected to occupy bureaucratic functions perceived as technical.

Learning that the exam knowledge is ephemeral and provisional already creates a disposition in the subjects to consider that the real activities performed in the context of civil service will be discovered and learnt only after they enter the institutions for which they have been approved. In other words, the idea that you learn about the work in practice is already one of the things learnt for the exam. The preparation for the public selection exams legitimizes this cultural schema that knowledge is learnt in practice.

### Schema 3: opposition to and rejection of ‘politics’

Another lesson acquired during the preparation for public selection exams is the aversion towards the political class. In the two preparatory courses that I frequented, it was common for teachers during the classes to make remarks and formulate discourses, associated or not with the topics of the class, that opposed civil servants to politicians, the latter being associated with dishonesty, vested interests and corruption.

Soon after the municipal elections of 2016, the Constitutional Law teacher on one of the courses that I accompanied used the class discussion on social rights as an opportunity to evaluate current government projects and the result of the elections:

Now Temer is already relaxing some laws with Constitutional Amendment 241. We have to be very careful with these amendments because we know that politicians are complicated creatures. And in fact, what these politicians worry about is being re-elected, or getting elected to a better post. Someone campaigning for mayor of São Paulo is already hoping to become President of the Republic. Because normally they become São Paulo mayor first. Hence the guys are actually pursuing their own interests. They have to do something for us, because otherwise they're not elected. But it's just a little. It's just enough for the people to swallow the thievery [*ladroagem*].

One of the students responded, saying that João Dória, at the time recently elected mayor of São Paulo, was already a wealthy man and had no reason to steal as the mayor. The teacher replied that she was not criticizing Dória specifically: her point was that this practice is traditional among politicians in Brazil.

The Logical Reasoning teacher was one of the most hard-hitting in his remarks against politicians. “Our rulers adore a lazy people. A lazy people are an easily manipulated people,” he said in one of his very first lessons. When setting exercises for the class to solve, it was common for him to use questions with statements that referred to politicians, always framed negatively. One of them, concerning the logic of propositions, said: “No politician is honest.” In another, which involved calculating the amount of tax to be paid by a trader, he said to the class: “You work five months of the year just to pay tax. And the money goes into whose pocket? Cabral, Temer, Renan, those lot...<sup>9</sup> While Brazilians fail to wake up, it will stay just the same. This scenario of robbery [*roubalheira*] hasn't changed one bit.”

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<sup>9</sup> A reference to the politicians Sérgio Cabral (former governor of Rio de Janeiro state, in prison at the time for corruption and money laundering), Michel Temer (at the time, President of the Republic) and Renan Calheiros (then a senator).

In the discourse of the teachers, the public selection exam, by contrast, was a mechanism that acted as a counterbalance to all the misdeeds in the political sphere. Civil servants, approved through exams and identified with a technical knowhow, were an antagonistic force to this supposed realm of disorder imposed by the political class. During the Coaching Day event, one of the speakers called the audience's attention to this virtuous element of the public selection exams:

The public selection exam will be your means to make a living. It will be the path to your dreams. But it is a form, our way, of being correct. If you feel outraged, if you look at the government and see everything that goes on as corruption, it is your way of being a force of good. Enter and do the right thing.

One of the students from the course, Roberto, was also an employee at Caixa Econômica Federal, a state-owned financial services company. About to turn forty, he said he had once been a union activist – hence, his class colleagues nicknamed him ‘black bloc.’ During a conversation in the interval between classes, we were talking about politics and the 2016 municipal elections when a classmate, Gabriel, interrupted us, telling Roberto: “You’d better get used to it because this black bloc life will be over when you become a tax auditor!” It was a humorous way for Gabriel to say that politics should not be part of the everyday concerns of a future civil servant of the state elite.

It is important to stress that the tax auditor's union of the Federal Revenue is intensely active politically, establishing frequent relations with the elected leaders, as Miranda (2015) was able to observe during the Fernando Henrique Cardoso government, making it one of Brazil's most important unions. The fact that they establish these relations, however, does not signify any alteration in their depiction of themselves as independent and autonomous technical workers and their depiction of the political class, supposedly interested in obtaining personal advantages of no benefit to the general population.

It is worth noting that this construction of the bureaucrat, combined with the rejection of politics and its representatives, is also a mark left by the institutionalization of the public selection exam in Brazil, strongly present in the discourses of its proponents in the 1930s when the intention was to oppose the technical to the political. Civil servants were technical agents who would exclude the political sphere (and the political class in general) from their connections, identifying politicians with a socially negative set of categories, such as ‘corruption,’ ‘robbery’ and ‘thievery.’ Thus, the understanding of politics, seen through the prism of the elected leaders in the system of representative democracy, and the role of the civil servant in reference to the former, is another of the cultural schemas that the students construct in their socialization with classmates and pedagogical agents on the preparatory courses.

The rejection of politics manifested in this context is not an obstacle to the desire to become part of the state, therefore, but is taken rather as a value that should guide the future actions of the civil servants. The heightened anti-political inclination experienced by the subjects marks a cultural model of the civil servant forged in the context of this process of preparation for the selection exams.

## **Final considerations**

Over the course of this work, my attempt has been to show, firstly, how the state's training and recruitment processes are units of analysis that analytically add to the agenda of research already consolidated in the ethnographic study of government institutions. These processes offer an insight into how selection exam candidates learn a code of behaviour that the institutions seek to impose on their officials. The preparation for civil service exams in Brazil, especially those for the fiscal administration, show how the imposition of behavioural models related to the exercise of public posts is a process that begins before the civil servants effectively start work in the government institutions to which they will be linked.

The learning that the students acquire during the preparatory courses for public selection exams is not limited to the contents and techniques taught for them to score well in the selection exams. It also involves a process of bureaucratic subjection, that is, a deep identification of the students – an identification that differs from the initial interest that led them to begin preparing for the selection exam – with the public career and an embodiment of the values and ideas promoted by the government institutions themselves. In the case of the selection exams for tax auditing, the preparation takes some years, generally on in-person courses and, increasingly, through distance learning. One of my closest interlocutors during the research, for example, had been studying for the elite selection exams for public administration, such as those for tax auditing, for twelve years. Over a long period, therefore, the subjects who begin preparing for the fiscal administration exams learn a series of cultural schemas from their teachers and classmates about what civil service – and consequently the civil servant – is and should be.

This set of schemas ends up constituting a cultural model of civil service that subjects come to share while still on the selection exam preparation courses. The concepts of schema and cultural models, taken from the contemporary debate in the field of cognitive anthropology, provides us with an analytic key to characterise the cognitive structures and the feeling of institutional belonging developed by the agents during the process of bureaucratic subjection. It seems to me that the relationship between government institutions and cultural models of civil service is imposed insofar as the search for standardized values and behaviours related to bureaucratic-administrative practice, as the ethnographic studies on government institutions demonstrate, is part of the construction of the institutional order that characterizes public bodies and entities.

In this sense, revealing the cultural models of civil service promoted by and for government institutions contributes to what Gupta and Sharma (2006) define as a key task for studies of state bureaucracies, namely to show the means through which the state represents itself as a coherent and singular entity. What is particularly distinctive in the case of this study on preparation for tax auditor exams in Brazil is the fact that this representation of the state is constructed in the context of educational institutions (preparatory courses) that formally have no connection to the public administration, although many of the agents involved in them do have, as either teachers or students who are already civil servants in some capacity.

The cultural model of civil service constructed during the preparation for public selection exams for the fiscal administration incorporates three cultural schemas – that is, abstract representations of the social environment, which are shared among the students preparing for the exams. The public jobs are seen as opportunities for upward social mobility based on merit and for enjoying the benefits associated with this mobility, such that the attractiveness of the job increases in proportion to how little effort the performance of the associated bureaucratic tasks requires and how many opportunities for spending time enjoying other activities (*civil service as distinction and enjoyment*) the post offers. The knowledge needed to pass the exams is recognized as ephemeral, possessing merely a pragmatic value of serving for the competition stage of the selective process. Once over, the students learn that they will learn what tasks they need to do as civil servants only when they arrive at their workplace to perform their activities (*knowledge of practice is learnt in practice*). Finally, I have shown how the candidates for civil service are socialized in a conception of politics, which is limited to the class of politicians and their actions in the legislative and executive spheres, associated in turn with a series of negative categories, such as corruption and the pursuit of personal interests. Civil servants, on the other hand, responsible for the performance of bureaucratic functions taken as technical, are seen as the antithesis of politicians insofar as their professional activities are for the common good, supposedly not the case of political agents (*opposition to and rejection of politics*).

This cultural model of civil service – whose component schemas are intended to be taken as partial, not exclusive – show the specificity of the process of bureaucratic subjection experienced by fiscal administrators in Brazil. Through the incorporation of values and the codes of conduct that these imply, the subjects gradually construct a representation of themselves and, simultaneously, form the bases for the legitimization of the governmental power they will eventually exert.

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# Un abordaje del estado en/desde sus fronteras nacionales: el caso del lado argentino de la Triple Frontera del Paraná

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## Resumen

El presente artículo resulta de las discusiones sobre la perpetuada idea de estado y el empleo del método etnográfico en el estudio sobre los agentes y las instituciones estatales. Para ello se tomaron en cuenta las prácticas estatales de control fronterizo que formaron parte del proceso de cierre de fronteras llevado a cabo por agentes e instituciones que se encuentran nucleados en el Centro de Frontera Iguazú, ubicado en el lado argentino de la región transfronteriza de la Triple Frontera del Paraná. El escrito tiene un posicionamiento teórico que hace uso de la noción del estado nación como abstracción discursiva, pero, por otro lado, teniendo en cuenta que se (con)forma y se materializa por agentes e instituciones articulados entre sí, que presentan sus propias particularidades a su interior. Esto genera una ruptura con las nociones estáticas que llegan a considerar al estado como una entelequia omnipresente y homogénea.

**Palabras clave:** estado; fronteras; control fronterizo; cierre de fronteras; etnografía, Triple Frontera del Paraná.

# An approach of the state in/ from its national borders: the case of the argentine side of the Tri-Border Area of Paraná

## Abstract

This article results from discussions about the perpetuated idea of the state and the use of the ethnographic method in the study of state agents and institutions. For this, the state border control practices that were part of the border closure process carried out by agents and institutions that are grouped in the Centro de Frontera Iguazú, located on the argentine side of the cross-border region of the Tri-Border Area of Paraná. The writing has a theoretical position that makes use of the notion of the nation state as a discursive abstraction, but, on the other hand, taking into account that it is (con)formed and materialized by agents and institutions articulated with each other, which present their own particularities inside. This generates a break with the static notions that come to consider the state as an omnipresent and homogeneous entelechy.

**Keywords:** state; borders; border control; border closures; ethnography; Tri-Border Area of Paraná.

# Uma abordagem do estado em/a partir de suas fronteiras nacionais: o caso do lado argentino da Tríplice Fronteira do Paraná

## Resumo

Este artigo resulta de discussões sobre a ideia perpetuada de estado e o uso do método etnográfico no estudo dos agentes e instituições estatais. Para isso, foram levadas em consideração as práticas de controle de fronteira estatal que fizeram parte do processo de fechamento de fronteiras realizado por agentes e instituições que estão agrupados no Centro de Fronteira Iguazú, localizado no lado argentino da região transfronteiriça da Tríplice Fronteira do Paraná. A escrita tem um posicionamento teórico que faz uso da noção de estado-nação como uma abstração discursiva, mas, por outro lado, levando em conta que ele é (con)formado e materializado por agentes e instituições articulados entre si, que apresentam suas próprias particularidades em seu interior. Isso gera uma ruptura com as noções estáticas que passam a considerar o estado como uma entelêquia onipresente e homogênea.

**Palavras-chave:** estado; fronteiras; controle de fronteira; fechamento de fronteiras; etnografia; Tríplice Fronteira do Paraná.

# Un abordaje del estado en/desde sus fronteras nacionales: el caso del lado argentino de la Triple Frontera del Paraná

*Hernan Ezequiel Garcia*

Como argumenta Abrams (2000), al igual que a dios, a la palabra estado se la ha escrito por mucho tiempo con mayúscula, debido a que en el imaginario colectivo se lo ha dotado de supremacía y omnipresencia, llegando a ser considerado algo que tiene una magnitud tan grande que debe destacarse hasta cuando se lo referencia de manera escrita. A través de su propuesta desmitificadora titulada 'Notas sobre la dificultad de estudiar el estado', Abrams manifiesta que el estado no es una cosa, más bien es un hecho social caracterizado por lo ilusorio y por lo abstracto, es "la máscara que nos impide ver la práctica política tal como es" (Abrams 2000: 98). Entonces, ¿qué es el estado? Las definiciones que suelen encontrarse en diccionarios y enciclopedias versan en torno a la forma de organización política ubicada en un territorio delimitado y provista de poder soberano a través de sus instituciones y organismos de gobierno. La mistificación de aquello nombrado como 'el estado' ha llegado tan lejos, que inclusive hasta el investigador más experimentado recae en las trampas de tratarlo como una idea y no como aquello que efectivamente es, una construcción de personas y de instituciones que tienen bajo su órbita "la especialización y concentración del mantenimiento del orden" (Gellner 2001: 16).

Este artículo resulta de las discusiones sobre la perpetuada idea de estado y el empleo del método etnográfico en el estudio con/sobre agentes e instituciones estatales<sup>1</sup>. Para ello se tomaron en cuenta las prácticas estatales de control fronterizo que formaron parte del proceso de cierre de fronteras llevado a cabo por agentes e instituciones que se encuentran nucleados en el Centro de Frontera Iguazú, ubicado en el lado argentino de la región transfronteriza de la Triple Frontera del Paraná. El escrito tiene un posicionamiento teórico que hace uso de la noción del estado nación como abstracción discursiva, pero, por otro lado, teniendo en cuenta que se (con)forma y se materializa en personas e instituciones articuladas entre sí, que presentan sus propias particularidades a su interior. Esto genera una ruptura con las nociones estáticas que llegan a considerar al estado como una entelequia omnipresente y homogénea.

Durante la pandemia de coronavirus, se tomó como medida sanitaria para evitar la propagación de contagios el llamado cierre de fronteras, un proceso que se ubica como parte de un conjunto de prácticas estatales de control fronterizo con la intención de demostrar y evidenciar que el ejercicio del poder estatal se basa en prácticas fundadas en el orden y el control de y sobre los confines geográficos del territorio nacional. Como argumenta Foucault (2007), el estado "no tiene entrañas, es bien sabido, no simplemente en cuanto carece de sentimientos, buenos o malos, sino que no las tiene en el sentido de que no tiene interior (...) no es nada más

<sup>1</sup> El análisis aquí plasmado forma parte de un proyecto de investigación doctoral en curso titulado "Seguridad y control fronterizo: el proceso de securitización en la Triple Frontera" que se realiza bajo el financiamiento de una beca doctoral del Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET) de Argentina. Además, se recibió el apoyo económico de dos proyectos de investigación colectivos: "El régimen sudamericano de migración y fronteras: reconfiguraciones y disputas en torno al control de la movilidad" (SeCyT-UNC) y "Fronteras en disputa: políticas de control, prácticas de contención y experiencias y estrategias de movilidad en el espacio sudamericano" (PIP-CONICET).

que el efecto móvil de un régimen de gubernamentalidades múltiples” (96). El régimen de gubernamentalidades que tiene lugar en el Centro de Frontera Iguazú, a metros del Puente de la Fraternidad “Tancredo Neves”, muestra cómo un variado número de agentes y de instituciones estatales tienen como objetivo común al control fronterizo. ¿Cómo fue llevado a cabo el proceso de cierre de fronteras y progresivas aperturas en el Centro de Frontera Iguazú? ¿cuáles son las prácticas estatales de control fronterizo que formaron parte de este proceso y de qué modo fueron ejecutadas? ¿cómo es la práctica etnográfica con agentes e instituciones estatales? Estos son los tres interrogantes que ayudan en la articulación y argumentación del análisis propuesto en el artículo.

Con respecto a la estructura del manuscrito, en el siguiente apartado se hace una pequeña contextualización del desarrollo de la investigación y se presenta la metodología que fue llevada a cabo. Le sigue la presentación del marco teórico desde el cual se problematizan la idea de estado nación y las nociones de fronteras nacionales, además, de presentarse la perspectiva teórico-metodológica por medio de la cual se analiza el hacer etnografía y el empleo del método etnográfico en investigaciones con/sobre agentes e instituciones estatales. En el apartado que continúa, se desarrolla una breve historización para ubicar a la región que se toma en consideración para tratar de entender su relevancia a nivel local y regional, además de su importancia global con respecto a la configuración de la geopolítica mundial. Posteriormente, se describe el contexto en el que se ubica el Centro de Frontera Iguazú, puesto de control fronterizo a metros del río Iguazú que habilita la circulación terrestre entre Brasil y Argentina. El apartado que le sigue consiste en un detallado relato etnográfico que resulta de las experiencias de dos estancias de trabajo de campo durante el proceso de cierre de fronteras y progresivas aperturas. En el próximo apartado se analiza cómo se llevan a cabo ciertas prácticas estatales de control fronterizo y sus efectos desde la dimensión territorial, el ámbito burocrático-administrativo y la heterogeneidad de las instituciones estatales. En el anteúltimo apartado, se reflexiona acerca de hacer etnografía y el uso del método etnográfico en este tipo de investigación con/sobre agentes e instituciones estatales. Finalmente, en las conclusiones se hace un cierre de lo desarrollado y se presentan las principales reflexiones que surgen del análisis expuesto.

## Contexto de la investigación y propuesta metodológica

La ciudad de Puerto Iguazú<sup>2</sup> se ubica en el extremo noroeste de la provincia de Misiones, a un par de kilómetros donde se encuentran la ruta nacional 101 que recorre el territorio provincial paralelamente al río Iguazú y la ruta nacional 12 que la recorre paralelamente al río Paraná. Luego del cruce de ambas rutas, pasa a tomar el nombre de esta última ruta y llega hasta el Puente de la Fraternidad “Tancredo Neves” que une a la ciudad argentina con la ciudad brasileña de Foz do Iguazú, es decir, un puente que une Argentina y Brasil. Un río o una cadena montañosa suelen tomarse como “marcadores paradigmáticos de los ‘límites naturales’ entre Estados-nación” (Gordillo y Leguizamón, 2002: 29), y en la Triple Frontera del Paraná se encuentran dos ríos que han servido como límites de la naturaleza para la construcción de la frontera nacional argentina. El río Paraná hasta la actualidad no lo atraviesa ningún puente ni ningún otro tipo de estructura material que conecte a las costas paraguayas con las argentinas y viceversa, a diferencia de Paraguay con Brasil que actualmente se encuentran finalizando la construcción del segundo puente que unirá a ambos países.

2 Se posiciona como la cuarta ciudad con mayor cantidad de habitantes de la provincia, antecedida por Posadas, Oberá y Eldorado. Proyección de Población según Municipio. Período 2010 - 2022 (año 2019). Instituto Provincial de Estadística y Censos (IPEC Misiones). Disponible en: <https://ipecmisiones.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/IPEC-Misiones-Estimacion-de-poblacion-2010-2022.pdf>

En el año 2020, a lo largo del mundo comenzó un brote de coronavirus y la Organización Mundial de la Salud lo declaró pandemia, lo que llevó a que cada estado tomaron las medidas que considerara pertinentes para evitar la propagación del virus hacia el interior de sus territorios nacionales. Una de ellas, y con gran adhesión a nivel mundial, fue el cierre de las fronteras nacionales, medida tomada por el gobierno nacional argentino a través del decreto nacional de necesidad y urgencia 274/2020 que prohibió el ingreso al territorio nacional a extranjeros y amplió su alcance con el decreto nacional de necesidad y urgencia 313/2020, incluyendo en la prohibición el ingreso a argentinas y argentinos residentes en el país y en el exterior. Esta decisión, coordinada a escala global, provocó la interrupción abrupta de la circulación en zonas de frontera y hubo un mayor control al habitual sobre las movilidades de las personas. Al cabo de dieciocho meses comenzaron a tener lugar las progresivas aperturas de fronteras, es decir, a un año y medio desde que se tomó la decisión del cierre en marzo de 2020.

En este marco del proceso de cierre de fronteras y progresivas aperturas por parte del estado nacional argentino es donde se ubica el análisis desarrollado en este artículo, el cual forma parte de un proyecto de investigación más amplio en la región. Se enfoca en el Centro de Frontera Iguazú – Foz de Iguazú, que tiene lugar en el lado argentino de la región de la Triple Frontera del Paraná y donde se nuclean agentes que forman parte de la Dirección Nacional de Migraciones, la Dirección General de Aduanas, el Servicio Nacional de Sanidad y Calidad Agroalimentaria (SENASA) y la Gendarmería Nacional Argentina, todas instituciones encargadas del control fronterizo. Se tomaron en consideración para el análisis dos estancias de trabajo de campo realizadas en el mes de noviembre de 2021 y en los meses de marzo y abril de 2022<sup>3</sup>.

Una articulación entre la propuesta de descripción densa de Clifford Geertz (2003), extensa y en donde los detalles contribuyen a la totalidad del relato, y la propuesta de Julieta Quirós (2014) de “escribir bien, y esto quiere decir: decir mucho con poco” (61), forman parte de la perspectiva metodológica adoptada para el artículo, y particularmente, para el relato etnográfico de más adelante. Se empleó el método etnográfico, a través de la realización de observaciones participantes en el Centro de Frontera Iguazú y en sus alrededores. Se llevaron a cabo entrevistas semi-estructuradas y se tuvieron charlas informales con agentes que son parte de las instituciones allí nucleadas, a quienes les hice la pregunta “¿cómo fue el cierre de fronteras?” y fue el puntapié inicial de varios argumentos que resultaron nodales para el análisis en cuestión. Además, realicé diversos cruces fronterizos a medida que se fueron dando las aperturas progresivas de fronteras, e hice uso de una construcción propia de recolección y sistematización de documentos estatales y noticias de medios de comunicación locales y nacionales enfocados en el proceso de cierre y aperturas de fronteras. Es necesario destacar que se habla de cierre en singular porque todo cruce fronterizo fue cerrado al unísono en el mes de marzo de 2020, a diferencia de las aperturas de fronteras en la región que tuvieron lugar desde septiembre de 2021 hasta abril de 2022. Lo que Geertz (1994) definió como experiencia próxima y experiencia distante entre las cuales se propicia un diálogo y una (co)construcción mutua, fue el posicionamiento teórico-metodológico desde el cual se partió para el desarrollo que tuvo como resultado el presente escrito.

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<sup>3</sup> Resulta pertinente aclarar que parte de la segunda estancia de trabajo de campo se hizo con una compañera de los dos proyectos de investigación colectivos mencionados anteriormente en la primera nota al pie.

## El estado nación y el control de/sobre sus fronteras

Desde las ciencias sociales, el estudio del estado ha ocupado un vasto número de discusiones en torno a sus conceptualizaciones. Una de las más destacadas es la pronunciada por Max Weber en el año 1919 en Munich, plasmada en el ensayo ‘La política como vocación’, en donde argumenta que “el Estado moderno es una asociación de dominación con carácter institucional que ha tratado, con éxito, de monopolizar dentro de un territorio la violencia física legítima como medio de dominación y que, a este fin, ha reunido todos los medios materiales en manos de su dirigente” (Weber, 1919: 4). El estado tiene el monopolio de la violencia, a la cual emplea para dominar a quienes se encuentran dentro su territorio. Resulta llamativo decir ‘su territorio’, es decir, darle la posesión del territorio al propio estado, una idea que ha sido perpetuada por varias décadas y lo que, en parte, ha hecho que radique la efectividad del estado como algo imaginado, como un ente superior que se encuentra sobre/entre las personas. Para no caer en ello al momento de su estudio, se sugiere “reconocer esa fortaleza de la *idea*<sup>4</sup> de estado como un poder ideológico y tratarla como objeto obligatorio de análisis” (Abrams, 2000: 98) en la búsqueda por llegar a plantear la inexistencia del mismo, o mejor dicho, el intento de no darle existencia, debido a que cuando uno habla del estado, adquiere un ‘pensamiento de estado’ al aplicar “categorías de pensamiento producidas y garantizadas por el Estado” (Bourdieu, 1993: 49).

Los estados se fueron transformando en lo que conocemos como estados nacionales “en relación con los cambios específicos acaecidos en la distribución del poder dentro de una sociedad estado” (Elias, 1998: 110). Hablar de estado moderno, implica hablar de estado nación, conceptualizado por Eric Hobsbawm (1998) como una “entidad social sólo en la medida en que se refiere a cierta clase de estado territorial moderno” (18). Por otra parte, la noción de lo que es una nación es provista por Benedict Anderson (1993), definiéndola como aquella “comunidad política imaginada como inherentemente limitada y soberana” (23). Desde una visión estatocéntrica, al estado nación lo conforman sus nacionales y el ejercicio del poder estatal se propicia gracias a la delimitación geográfica de un territorio, planteándose como la forma moderna que controla y ordena a través del poder considerado soberano. Existe “una estrecha solidaridad implícita entre la ilusión de una evolución necesaria, unilineal, de las formaciones sociales y la aceptación acrítica del Estado-nación como ‘forma definitiva’ de la institución política, destinada a perpetuarse indefinidamente” (Wallerstein y Balibar, 1991: 141-142), pero con más frecuencia esa idea se discute, llegando a plantearse el riesgo de su desaparición.

Más que su desaparición, los estados nacionales han ido cambiando en las últimas décadas: el ejercicio del poder, la soberanía y el control estatal se han ido reconfigurando y transformando. Siguiendo la línea de fijeza y estaticidad del estado, históricamente se ha buscado que las fronteras nacionales tuvieran el mismo efecto, encargadas en un primer momento de la delimitación territorial para darle existencia y finitud al propio estado. El “carácter abstracto del estado, lejos de ser un mito, es precisamente aquello que permite definir su margen a través de un rango de prácticas administrativas” (Asad 2008: 55), las cuales se encuentran presentes en el día a día y producen la continua (re)construcción y (re)definición del margen estatal. Van Houtum, Kramsch y Zierhofer (2005) utilizan el anglicismo *b/ordering* en cuanto a las prácticas fronterizas, presentando un juego de palabras que puede leerse tanto como prácticas de fronterización, y al quitarle la primera letra de la palabra, se transforma en prácticas de ordenamiento. Las ideas de orden nacional en las regiones transfronterizas son personificadas y materializadas en agentes e instituciones estatales, a quienes Bigo (2008) considera pertenecientes al campo de profesionales de la (in)seguridad, caracterizados por tener visiones y concepciones de las fronteras nacionales que encuentran coincidencias en al menos un punto nodal: definir las como límites geográficos que deben ser controlados por ellos. La dimensión territorial de las prácticas estatales fronterizas ha sido abordada por autores como Das y Poole (2008), Agnew (2009) y Bigo (2011) quienes

4 Cursiva del autor.

coinciden en la parcial efectividad discursiva y práctica que han tenidos los estados nacionales en la reiterada (re)marcación y (re)definición de las fronteras geográficas de sus territorios. Pero al mismo tiempo visibilizan la amplitud, la transformación y el continuo cambio de las regiones y márgenes donde se encuentran dos o más estados nacionales.

Como argumenta Bigo (2011), “es necesario reflexionar sobre la frontera (...) no simplemente como confines de un espacio de poder dado” (2), sino como regiones en la que los agentes e instituciones estatales desarrollan prácticas de control, donde los puestos de control y los documentos (personales y estatales) entran en la cotidianeidad de la burocracia del control fronterizo. Das (2004), Ferme (2004), Jeganathan (2004), Poole (2004), Sanford (2004), Gordillo (2006) y Peirano (2009) han investigado y discutido en sus trabajos acerca del uso de los documentos personales por parte del estado, algunos de ellos en puestos de control, además de la práctica de la burocracia del control a través de documentos estatales como leyes, decretos, resoluciones, entre otros. En el análisis de las próximas páginas se toman en cuenta esos trabajos y se problematiza sobre las prácticas estatales de control fronterizo que formaron parte del proceso de cierre de fronteras y progresivas aperturas en el puesto de control fronterizo llamado Centro de Frontera Iguazú. Por otra parte, las propuestas de Balbi y Boivin (2008), Ribeiro (2008), Zenobi (2010), Balbi (2012) y Quirós (2019) ayudan a reflexionar sobre la etnografía, el empleo del método etnográfico y el lugar del antropólogo en el abordaje del estado, agentes e instituciones, en/desde sus fronteras nacionales.

### **Mucho más que el encuentro de tres estados nacionales**

La llamada Triple Frontera del Paraná es la región en la cual se encuentran tres estados nacionales y en donde cada uno de ellos, si bien tienen sus propias lógicas de control fronterizo, trabajan de manera conjunta y articulada. El gran despliegue de la presencia de agentes e instituciones estatales allí presentes, tanto de Argentina como de Brasil y de Paraguay, tiene su correlato en el imaginario de zona caliente, caótica, insegura y peligrosa que ha sido construido y reafirmado desde hace varias décadas. Ubicada en el encuentro de los ríos Paraná e Iguazú, forma parte de la ecorregión llamada selva paranaense, la cual hace más de medio siglo tenía una extensión de 120 millones de hectáreas y actualmente sólo queda menos de un 10% de su extensión original<sup>5</sup>, perdiendo terreno ante el avance de la deforestación debido a la agroindustria. El pequeño remanente de selva que allí se encuentra ha servido para describir a la región como indomable, donde la naturaleza es una barrera, un impedimento, una zona desconocida. Se creó un sentimiento de inseguridad e inclusive se llegó a plantear la ausencia del estado, porque justamente es ahí “donde la naturaleza puede ser imaginada como salvaje y descontrolada y donde el estado está constantemente redefiniendo sus modos de gobernar y legislar” (Das y Poole, 2008: 24).

Allí se encuentra el Acuífero Guaraní, uno de los reservorios de agua dulce más grandes del mundo y en donde hay intereses geopolíticos en continua puja desde hace casi un siglo. En la década de 1930, se creó en primer lugar el Parque Nacional Iguazú del lado argentino y luego el Parque Nacional do Iguacu del lado brasileño, y fue la jurisdicción nacional de cada uno lo que dio lugar a proyectos estatales que incluyeron la conservación ambiental, el desarrollo económico y el incentivo de poblamiento. El crecimiento de la región se vio influenciado por políticas llevadas a cabo tanto por gobiernos democráticos como por dictaduras militares de los tres países. Entre las décadas de 1970 y 1980, se planificó, se construyó y se puso en funcionamiento a la represa binacional Itaipú, que hasta hace poco más de una década fue la central hidroeléctrica con capacidad

<sup>5</sup> Ministerio de Turismo. Provincia de Misiones. Disponible en: <https://www.yvera.tur.ar/publicaciones/documentos/c69ae42a-2b71-47ae-81e1-986e-33c7d385.pdf>



operativa más grande del mundo (Folch, 2013). Este proyecto realizado por Brasil y Paraguay no sólo puso a la región en el foco del contexto sudamericano, sino que adquirió visibilidad a una escala internacional en términos geopolíticos, tanto por la magnitud de la hidroeléctrica como por el extenso acuífero allí presente. Los controles fronterizos de cada uno de los tres estados que conforman la Triple Frontera del Paraná comenzaron a planificarse y articularse de manera conjunta recién con la llegada del Mercosur, ya que “antes disso as forças de segurança pública que atuavam no segmento fronteiriço não se comunicavam sobre problemas ligados a segurança e seguiam rigorosamente o conceito de lei territorial” (Ferrari 2011: 355)<sup>6</sup>.

Además, su relevancia a nivel global se vio incrementada pos Guerra Fría con el cambio de paradigma a nivel mundial con respecto a los lineamientos de la seguridad internacional que debían seguir aquellos países nucleados en aquella abstracción llamada occidente. El terrorismo fue configurado como parte de las nuevas amenazas que el hemisferio norte se atribuía el deber de combatir, responsabilizando a la comunidad árabe-musulmana (y a otras comunidades y estados no alineados a occidente) por los diversos actos a los que ubicaron en la categoría de terrorismo. La atención puesta en la región se dio por la nutrida presencia de población de origen sirio-libanés y los supuestos vínculos con los atentados en la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires a la Embajada de Israel en el año 1992 y a la Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) dos años más tarde. Por estos atentados fueron responsabilizados la República Islámica de Irán y la organización musulmana libanesa Hezbollah, a quienes vinculan su presencia en la región. Otras de aquellas nuevas amenazas que se configuraron a fines del siglo XX y tienen vigencia hasta la actualidad son el contrabando, el narcotráfico, la trata y el tráfico de personas, la migración irregular y el lavado de dinero, amenazas que supuestamente están a la orden del día en este triffinio y han sido utilizadas en la construcción de un imaginario de región insegura y peligrosa en donde el caos y el delito se encuentran presentes de manera latente.

El atentado a las Torres Gemelas a comienzos del presente siglo recrudeció la disputa entre occidente, o mejor dicho Estados Unidos y las potencias europeas, y los estados pertenecientes a la comunidad árabe-musulmana. En el año 2003, un informe de Rex Hudson para la División Federal de Investigación de la Biblioteca del Congreso de Washington titulado “Terrorist and organized crime groups in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of South America: a report” asoció a la región presentada como ‘La Triple Frontera’ con un sinnúmero de males que aquejan a las tierras donde el río Iguazú se encuentra con el río Paraná. Desde el narcotráfico y el contrabando, pasando por la recaudación de fondos de grupos terroristas, luego por la presencia de grupos delictivos indígenas y mafias argentina, brasileña y paraguaya, hasta llegar a afirmar la existencia de mafias de Costa de Marfil, Japón, Taiwán, entre muchos otros países (Hudson, 2003). Investigaciones como las de Rabossi (2004), Montenegro y Giménez Béliveau (2006), Lynn (2008), Bello (2015) y Agulló (2017) han cuestionado estos imaginarios que se han construido sobre la región, asociados a ciertos intereses geopolíticos y sostenidos gracias al rol clave ocupado por los medios de comunicación.

Todo este contexto permite pensar la complejidad de la región donde se encuentra la Triple Frontera del Paraná. Su conformación por el encuentro de tres estados que ha incluido la creación de dos parques nacionales, una gran reserva de agua dulce, intereses geopolíticos y la construcción de un imaginario peligroso y caótico, habilitaron a que se diera un despliegue de prácticas de control fronterizo, utilizándose en algunos casos la excusa contradictoria de la ‘ausencia del estado’ para que en estas regiones haya una mayor presencia, de la ya existente, de agentes e instituciones estatales.

6 Es necesario aclarar que hubo una estrecha cooperación entre los tres países durante el Plan Cóndor, definido como aquel “andamiaje con evolución histórica que facilitó las actividades extraterritoriales de las dictaduras de seguridad nacional del Cono Sur” (Slatman 2016: 454). De todos modos, en ese contexto la colaboración se dio estrictamente con el fin de perseguir, asesinar y desaparecer personas opositoras a los regímenes militares, a diferencia de las intenciones integracionistas para la región bajo las cuales se creó el Mercosur. Los análisis sobre los lineamientos de seguridad fronteriza que llevó a cabo la dictadura argentina se encuentran en Lvovich (2009), Salamanca (2014), y Rodríguez (2017), quienes coinciden en la reafirmación de la soberanía, el poblamiento en zonas de fronteras y en el nacionalismo territorial por percibir a Brasil como un país agresor.

## Un puesto de control fronterizo en el lado argentino de la Triple Frontera del Paraná

Bajo la presidencia de Mauricio Macri en el año 2017, a través del decreto 68/2017, en Argentina se creó la Comisión Nacional de Fronteras encargada de coordinar y regular los ‘Pasos Internacionales’ y los ‘Centros de Frontera’ con el “fin de armonizar su funcionamiento desde una perspectiva interministerial que aumente la integración fronteriza, facilite el tránsito de personas, agilice el comercio internacional y prevenga el delito transnacional” (decreto 68/2017). El decreto tomó en cuenta como antecedente legislativo a la ley N° 22.352, sancionada y promulgada en el año 1980 bajo el gobierno de la última dictadura cívico militar eclesiástica, y reglamentada al año siguiente, pero jamás fue aplicada. Dicha ley se encargaba del régimen jurídico de administración de los Centros de Frontera, definiendo a cada uno de ellos como aquel complejo que reunía “en un área delimitada y próxima a un Paso Internacional habilitado, a los Organismos Nacionales cuya misión es el control del tránsito de personas, transportes y mercaderías, desde y hacia el país, como asimismo de todos los servicios auxiliares, playas de carga y descarga, y de estacionamiento de transporte” (ley N° 22.352). El decreto 68/2017 tomó en cuenta estos lineamientos en lo que refiere a la política fronteriza nacional, declarándose un total de catorce Centros de Frontera, los cuales pasaron a estar bajo la órbita de la Secretaría del Interior perteneciente al Ministerio del Interior, dejando de formar parte de la Secretaría de Fronteras del Ministerio de Seguridad. La relevancia debido al flujo de movimiento que caracterizaban (y actualmente caracterizan) a esos pasos internacionales fue la principal razón por la que se decidió la transformación de ellos, con el “fin de establecer una estrategia integral de lucha contra el narcotráfico, la trata de personas, el contrabando y otros delitos transnacionales” (decreto 68/2017). De esta forma, se asoció al continuo movimiento de personas y mercancías con el potencial despliegue de actividades ilícitas en pasos fronterizos.

El Centro de Frontera Iguazú es uno de ellos, ubicado en la ciudad de Puerto Iguazú, en la provincia de Misiones, y en donde se encuentran instituciones y agentes estatales encargados del control fronterizo, como la Dirección Nacional de Migraciones, la Dirección General de Aduanas, SENASA y la Gendarmería Nacional Argentina. Cabe destacar que, por fuera del Centro de Frontera, en la ciudad se encuentra Prefectura Naval, la Policía de Misiones, el Consulado de la República del Paraguay y el Consulado de la República Federativa de Brasil. Las características propias de la idea de estado y la contribución que tienen las fronteras nacionales a ella, han habilitado a que las dinámicas y las actividades que se desarrollan en la región sean permeadas por las prácticas llevadas a cabo por los agentes e instituciones argentinas<sup>7</sup>.

### La práctica etnográfica en un puesto de control

Hacia fines de septiembre de 2021, el gobierno nacional argentino decidió implementar una prueba piloto de apertura del paso fronterizo Iguazú-Foz do Iguazú debido a la situación epidemiológica de ambos países involucrados y con fines turísticos, a través de la decisión administrativa 989/2021, ya que las Cataratas de Iguazú es uno de los destinos más elegidos por visitantes nacionales e internacionales. Mi llegada a la ciudad de Puerto Iguazú se dio a fines del mes de octubre, justo un mes de cumplida la apertura del paso para argentinos y argentinas residentes y con la particularidad de que a inicios de noviembre se habilitaba el ingreso al territorio nacional a extranjeros no residentes. La progresividad de la apertura de fronteras también se dio del otro lado del puente, pero no se dieron en consonancia entre ambos países, ya que el no residir en la ciudad de Puerto Iguazú, me imposibilitó cruzar al país vecino. Mi primer día allí, al llegar caminando al Centro de Frontera Iguazú había una fila de al menos una decena de autos para poder cruzar por el puente.

<sup>7</sup> Existen también vínculos con los agentes y las instituciones estatales de Brasil y de Paraguay, como pueden ser los Comités de Integración Fronteriza y el Comando Tripartito.

Al ingreso del área donde se encuentra emplazado el centro, se ubica un puesto de Gendarmería Nacional con uno o varios gendarmes encargados de dirigir el tránsito ya que, según la época del año, puede haber una gran cantidad de autos particulares, taxis y colectivos, exceptuando a los camiones que se desvían hacia la zona de transporte de cargas. Al acercarme al gendarme que hablaba con cada conductor que iba avanzando por la fila de autos, me comentó que Brasil no dejaba ingresar a aquellas personas que no fueran residentes de Puerto Iguazú, por lo que le consulté si conocía cuál era la razón de ello, a lo cual me miró con desconcierto respondiendo “ni idea, no tenemos tanta comunicación del otro lado”<sup>8</sup>. Le agradecí y me retiré.

El edificio que comprende al Centro de Frontera se asemeja a una gran letra H visto desde un plano cenital. Al llegar desde el lado argentino pueden verse dos estructuras de una planta, paralelas entre sí, de ladrillo visto compuesta por varias puertas y ventanales. Estas se encuentran unidas por una estructura de dos plantas, una planta baja compuesta por cabinas de peajes y una planta superior donde se encuentran oficinas. Las cabinas tienen personal de la Dirección General de Aduanas y SENASA quienes llevan a cabo el control de vehículos y mercaderías que cruzan hacia Argentina. En las oficinas de arriba se ubica una parte de las áreas administrativas de las instituciones que se hacen allí presente. Antes de que comience la estructura de mano izquierda, hay un servicio de taxis y un kiosco, luego continúan las oficinas de Gendarmería Nacional, y finalmente se encuentra la parte de la Dirección Nacional de Migraciones que se encarga de los ingresos al territorio argentino. Del lado derecho tienen lugar los baños y la parte de la Dirección Nacional de Migraciones encargada de los egresos del territorio argentino, además de ubicarse a su derecha (por fuera de la H), el área de Migraciones avocada al egreso de vehículos particulares.

Leyendo aquella noche de mi llegada los decretos de cierres y aperturas de los países involucrados, las modificaciones a las normativas establecidas y las novedades que los medios de comunicación locales informaban, me encontré con el artículo 4 de la portaria N° 658 del 5 de octubre de 2021 sobre las medidas excepcionales y temporarias para el ingreso al país en los términos de la ley N° 13.979 de 2020. En ese artículo podía leerse la prohibición de ingreso a Brasil a extranjeros de cualquier nacionalidad por rutas o por cualquier otro medio terrestre, pero tomando como una de las posibles excepciones “ao tráfico de residentes fronteiriços em cidades-gêmeas, mediante a apresentação de documento de residente fronteiriço ou de outro documento comprobatório, desde que seja garantida a reciprocidade no tratamento ao brasileiro pelo país vizinho” (portaria N° 658). Puerto Iguazú y Foz de Iguazú son incluidas dentro de la categoría de ciudades gemelas al encontrarse vinculadas principalmente por su ubicación geográfica y por el gran número de relaciones socio-políticas establecidas entre ellas, además de los lazos que mantienen con las ciudades paraguayas que se encuentran al este del río Paraná. En esta categoría entran en disputa las fronteras nacionales porque si bien se reconoce una región interdependiente entre varios aspectos de su cotidianeidad, opera aquella división administrativa y de jurisdicción nacional. La progresividad que mantuvo el gobierno brasileño en cuanto a la apertura de fronteras nacionales terrestres, permitió en un primer momento el ingreso a aquellos residentes de ciudades gemelas, y luego de dos meses, a través de la portaria interministerial N° 661, a cualquier residente argentino.

Al día siguiente de mi llegada, volví al Centro de Frontera y vi que había una gendarme en el puesto de ingreso del complejo. Me presenté. Le expliqué sobre la investigación que me encontraba realizando allí y el interés por conversar con alguna persona de su fuerza acerca del proceso de cierre de fronteras. Me señaló una puerta a unos metros de distancia donde podía leerse en el vidrio contiguo “Gendarmería Nacional”. Allí me dirigí al primer gendarme que encontré detrás de un escritorio explicándole lo mismo que a la gendarme hacía un momento. Me dijo que esperara al costado, que iba a llamar a un superior. Pasado unos minutos, llegó otro gendarme que me preguntó qué necesitaba y por qué me encontraba ahí, a lo cual respondí con la

8 Comunicación personal, 31 de octubre de 2021.

explicación que para ese entonces se había vuelto un monólogo de presentación. Me dijo que el superior se desocupaba en un rato y me venía a ver. Esperé apenas un par de minutos y se hizo presente el superior, quien me invitó a salir para hablar afuera. Allí me contó el caos que implicó el cierre abrupto del puente y las largas jornadas de trabajo, ya que nunca pararon con sus actividades e inclusive se incrementaron las guardias. El cierre de fronteras provocó que el control fronterizo se transforme con respecto a como se realizaba en la llamada ‘vieja normalidad’ pero nunca se dejó de trabajar. Me comentó que en la zona pasan *muchas cosas*<sup>9</sup> pero no profundizó qué cosas ni de qué modo, y opinó que el manejo sanitario y administrativo de la pandemia ahí fue *algo político*. Destacó que su fuerza siempre se encargó de la seguridad de las personas y de ayudar en donde hiciera falta, “nosotros somos una fuerza auxiliar, esto es más una zona aduanera”<sup>10</sup>. En un momento se acercó otro gendarme y le dijo que lo necesitaban, me consultó si necesitaba algo más, a lo cual respondí que no y le agradecí. Luego de conversaciones con otros uniformados y con personal migratorio, al estar por retirarme del complejo le consulto a la gendarme del ingreso si era posible sacar una foto desde ahí con mi cámara, a lo cual me responde que no se pueden sacar fotos ahí a menos que me aleje un poco, indicándome con su dedo unos metros más allá, donde por lo visto se cruza la propia frontera del Centro de Frontera Iguazú.

Meses más tarde cuando volví, a fines del mes de marzo, las habilitaciones de ingreso y egreso tanto de Argentina como de Brasil se encontraban flexibilizadas casi en su totalidad, salvo los cruces fluviales. La categoría que utilizó el gobierno argentino para llevar a cabo las aperturas progresivas de fronteras fue la de corredores seguros, que desde una mirada sanitaria implicaba la demanda y cumplimiento de ciertas requisitos epidemiológicos y administrativos para poder salir y/o entrar al territorio nacional. Uno de los requisitos administrativos implementados por las autoridades nacionales fue la solicitud de una declaración jurada de egreso junto con la presentación del documento nacional o pasaporte. Para el ingreso a Brasil se estipulaba la presentación del documento nacional o pasaporte, el carnet de vacunación y llenar a mano con datos personales el cartão de entrada e saída provisto en el puesto de control por la Polícia de Imigração<sup>11</sup>.

Lo llamativo de aquellas semanas del mes de abril de 2022 fueron los continuos cambios a lo largo de los días de las nuevas disposiciones y los documentos solicitados en cuanto a la ‘apertura de las fronteras’ de ambos países, provocando dificultades en la ejecución articulada de esos cambios entre los diversos agentes de las instituciones encargadas del control fronterizo. Un claro ejemplo de ello se dio a comienzos de Semana Santa<sup>12</sup> en donde las Cataratas del Iguazú suele ser un destino de paseo ampliamente elegido por visitantes de la región y de todo el país. El incentivo turístico a nivel nacional, además de la situación epidemiológica imperante, contribuyó al cambio de medidas tomadas por el Ministerio del Interior para el ingreso y el egreso al territorio nacional argentino. Se implementó como único requisito para el ingreso de residentes argentinos una declaración jurada electrónica, eximiendo a quienes ingresaran por un plazo menor a 24 horas vía terrestre. Uno de los últimos días de la segunda estancia de trabajo de campo, luego de haber estado con mi compañera durante gran parte del día en Foz de Iguazú, nos dirigimos para hacer el ingreso al territorio argentino y había una fila de personas que al menos triplicaba la cantidad que se había visto los días previos. Encontrándonos allí y ante la cantidad de consultas de las personas acerca de los últimos cambios y si debía hacerse o no la declaración jurada electrónica, un agente migratorio dijo que no era necesario hacer la declaración jurada si eras argentino y que los requisitos *cambian todos los días*, el cual fue su argumento para justificar su desconocimiento sobre lo que debía ser solicitado y entregado para poder ingresar.

9 Las cursivas utilizadas a lo largo del relato etnográfico se refieren a las propias expresiones de los interlocutores.

10 Comunicación personal, 1 de noviembre de 2021.

11 Sobre los organismos encargados del control migratorio, es necesario destacar que, en Brasil, la Polícia de Imigração es parte de la Polícia Federal que se encuentra bajo la órbita del Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública. En Argentina, la Dirección Nacional de Migraciones es un organismo que depende directamente del Ministerio del Interior.

12 Fiesta cristiana.

## Territorio, documentos y heterogeneidad

### Territorio

El proceso de cierre de fronteras fue una medida de control desplegada por la mayoría de los estados a lo largo del mundo que si bien tuvo causas sanitarias, contribuyó al gran número de prácticas de control fronterizo encargadas de la continua (re)definición y (re)construcción de las fronteras nacionales. Se utilizó, una vez más, el discurso de un adentro y afuera, reificando y reproduciendo “al estado como inherentemente territorial”<sup>13</sup> (Agnew 2009: 107), demarcado por límites nacionales que deben ser controlados de las amenazas externas. En su artículo titulado “Frontières, territoire, sécurité, souveraineté”, Bigo (2011) argumenta que “la movilización (político-discursiva) para transformar una frontera en línea de demarcación y no en lugar de interacción y de unión es permanente. Supone un trabajo de inculcación, exhortación, extensión y rutinización, pero esta movilización en el cotidiano del trabajo del Estado ha estado muy integrada en nuestros razonamientos que no la vemos. Eso que llamamos nuestros saberes, han incorporado el mito (territorial) y lo han digerido hasta hacerlo desaparecer del recuerdo” (2)<sup>14</sup>. Aquella idea mitificada de estado ha sido posibilitada, entre algunos otros elementos, por la propia idea mitificada de las fronteras nacionales, definiéndolas históricamente como aquellos límites geográficos donde un estado termina, donde los estados se dividen.

Un estado nación parte de la premisa que su territorio debe ser controlado ante las amenazas externas, como muestra el análisis acerca de los cierres de frontera en Reino Unido y en Turquía durante la pandemia realizado por Bigo, Guild y Kuskonmaz (2021). Ellos utilizan la categoría acuñada por Agnew de ‘trampa territorial’, al referirse a las situaciones en las que “las lógicas geográficas y administrativas son la primera reacción de los estados modernos en frente a lo desconocido” (475)<sup>15</sup>. El proceso de cierre de fronteras nacionales a nivel mundial debido a la pandemia de coronavirus generó una transformación en cuanto a las prácticas de control empleadas previamente. En un primer momento se dio el cierre y la prohibición total de ingreso de personas, salvo aquellas exceptuadas, y luego con las aperturas, se implementaron requisitos burocrático-administrativos que habilitaron a la relación de un control fronterizo y sanitario en simultáneo, con la incorporación del test de antígenos, los PCRs, el carnet de vacunación y la declaración jurada electrónica.

A lo largo del relato etnográfico se puede ver cómo la variable territorial opera en el control estatal de las regiones transfronterizas, teniendo un lugar destacado aquellas prácticas administrativas que refuerzan y reproducen la noción de trampa territorial en el ejercicio materializado de los documentos estatales. A través de decretos, resoluciones y portarias entraron en funcionamiento aquellas disposiciones administrativas de los gobiernos nacionales de cerrar y controlar los confines de sus territorios, pero varias veces su aplicación no produjo los efectos esperados. El caso del agente migratorio que desconocía sobre los cambios en las últimas aperturas de ingreso a Argentina o el caso del gendarme que no sabía y además manifestó la falta de comunicación con las fuerzas del otro país, son dos claros ejemplos de que los efectos ideales que buscan producir las decisiones administrativas, pueden llegar a distar bastante de los efectos de las prácticas. “Los márgenes no son simplemente espacios periféricos. Algunas veces, como en el caso de las fronteras de los estados de una nación, determinan qué queda dentro y qué queda fuera. En otros casos, como en el de los puestos de control, atraviesan el cuerpo político del estado. Las fronteras y los puestos de control (...) son espacios en los cuales la soberanía, en tanto derecho sobre la vida y la muerte, es experimentada de un modo potencial, creando efectos de pánico y un sentimiento de peligro, aun si ‘nada sucede’” (Das y Poole 2008: 34).

<sup>13</sup> Traducción propia.

<sup>14</sup> Traducción propia.

<sup>15</sup> Traducción propia.

## Documentos

Es en los puestos de control fronterizo en donde se ejecutan prácticas que giran en torno al uso de documentos personales, los cuales “possuem dois aspectos paradoxalmente complementares: de um lado, permitem a seus portadores vários privilégios em relação aos que não os possuem; de outro, submetem-nos a um constante controle externo” (Peirano 2009: 65). Legitiman la pertenencia y la exclusión, y su naturalización “a menudo nos hacen olvidar que (...) carecen por completo de valor sin las relaciones sociales que los producen y les dan significado como símbolos de algo más” (Gordillo 2006: 192), su efectividad no la otorga su materialización, la otorga la carga simbólica que tiene la existencia de una persona con documento de identidad en un territorio nacional determinado. El Puente de la Fraternidad “Tancredo Neves” se encontró habilitado durante los meses de octubre y noviembre sólo para personas residentes en ciudades gemelas, es decir, sólo aquellas que entraban en la categoría de tránsito vecinal fronterizo (TVF). A través del acuerdo aprobado y reglamentado por la disposición N° 12.167/2002 de la Dirección Nacional de Migraciones, en el año 2020 se incorporó en Argentina dicha categoría propuesta por la decisión N° 18/99 del Consejo del Mercosur. En el artículo primero, la disposición resuelve que “los ciudadanos nacionales o naturalizados de un Estado Parte o sus residentes legales, nacionales o naturalizados de otro país del MERCOSUR, que se domicilien en localidades contiguas de dos o más Estados Parte, podrán obtener la credencial de Tránsito Vecinal Fronterizo (TVF). La calidad de residente legal, a los efectos de este convenio, se determinará en base a la legislación de cada Estado Parte” (disposición 12.167/2002). Si bien hasta la actualidad la tarjeta física no se encuentra implementada, la categoría de TVF ayuda a romper con la idea de la frontera rígida para plantear una conurbación de movilidades que se intersectan. Hace referencia a una circulación fluida en la que el control fronterizo se lleva a cabo de manera ágil para quienes residen en un radio de 50 kilómetros. Pero en la práctica, ‘residir’ no es requisito para la circulación bajo los términos del tránsito vecinal fronterizo, ya que depende de la situación, el contexto y del puesto de control por el que se quiera realizar el cruce.

Como se presentó anteriormente, durante los meses de octubre y noviembre, el estado brasileño sólo permitió el ingreso terrestre a residentes de ‘ciudades gemelas’, por lo que tener la residencia local era lo único que habilitaba el cruce por el puente. Ya con las aperturas totales de los cruces terrestres a países vecinos, si el tiempo de permanencia era mayor a 24 horas, los requisitos eran presentar el carnet de vacunación, el documento de identidad y completar de manera escrita el cartão de entrada e saída de la Policía de Imigração<sup>16</sup>, formulario solicitado a quienes ingresan al territorio nacional de Brasil. Quienes ingresaban por menos de 24 horas o sólo realizaban tránsito para cruzar a otro país, no era necesario presentarse ante la Policía de Imigração. El lado argentino, por su parte, tanto previo al cierre del paso como así también desde que se fueron dando las progresivas aperturas y hasta la actualidad, requiere en todas las circunstancias hacer el trámite de ingreso y/o salida del país que consiste en mostrar el documento nacional de identidad o el pasaporte a un agente migratorio por una ventanilla o a través del escaneo del mismo por casillas electrónicas.

Luego de las aperturas terrestres, el estado argentino exigió (y exige) en todas las circunstancias controlar la documentación de cada persona que sale o ingresa al territorio nacional. En el lado brasileño quien planea cruzar por un lapso menor a 24 horas y dentro del radio de 50 kilómetro no debe dirigirse a realizar el trámite migratorio, ya que de ese modo aplica para todas las personas la figura del tránsito vecinal fronterizo, y no por residencia como se reglamentó durante el cierre de fronteras. Se destaca que algo totalmente diferente sucede en el Puente Internacional de la Amistad, estructura de hormigón de más de medio kilómetro que une la ciudad brasileña de Foz de Iguazú y la ciudad paraguaya de Ciudad del Este. Allí la circulación de personas

<sup>16</sup> La Policía Federal de Brasil tiene un área que es la Policía de Imigração, encargada del control de entrada y salida en los puntos de fronteras, el registro de extranjeros y la deportación de extranjeros.

y vehículos es continua y fluida durante todo el día ya que en el cruce no se realizan trámites migratorios que impliquen un ingreso y un egreso por menos de 24 horas. De esta forma, se puede ver cómo opera la burocracia del control fronterizo en los puestos de control por parte de cada estado y qué solicita cada uno. Que el control no se realice en el cruce fronterizo, no implica que no haya control, sino más bien se desplaza, como puede verse el control brasileño sobre las movibilidades llevado a cabo en las rutas y en las terminales de transporte.

## Heterogeneidad

La Dirección Nacional de Migraciones, la Dirección General de Aduanas, el Servicio Nacional de Sanidad y Calidad Agroalimentaria (SENASA) y la Gendarmería Nacional Argentina son instituciones estatales que, si bien responden a una lógica estatal de control fronterizo, cada una tiene su propia visión y concepción de lo que implica dicho control. Ello radica en torno a las prácticas que desarrollan cada uno de los agentes que forman parte de ellas. Discursos que alegan brindar seguridad para cuidar a las personas, controlar mercancías, evitar que se trafique y/o contrabandee, realizar trámites de ingreso y egreso de personas, entre otras, son prácticas que tienen lugar en el Centro de Frontera Iguazú. Si bien cada agente construye su propia percepción de cómo es y cómo se vincula con la idea de frontera nacional, las tareas de todos ellos confluyen en torno al control fronterizo.

Bigo (2008) trabaja tomando la idea bourdeana de campo en el estudio sobre los que él llama “profesionales del manejo del malestar”. En un primer momento, haciendo referencia a investigaciones en Europa pero que pueden usarse de lente para el presente estudio, desarrolla que:

Los sistemas policiales nacionales se estructuran en redes diferenciadas y dibujan sobre los recursos internacionales según sus respectivas especialidades profesionales, incluyendo el narcotráfico, el terrorismo, el mantenimiento del orden y el vandalismo en el fútbol. Esta diferenciación de especialidad significa que la policía, por tanto, no forma una red singular, única y homogénea. Nos serviría mejor pensar en un “archipiélago de policiamiento”, o un mosaico que une a la policía nacional, policía militar, aduanas de control, inmigración, consulados e incluso servicios de inteligencia y el militar (...). Estos archipiélagos están estructurados más allá de sus actividades “comunes”, a lo largo de líneas de identificación cultural (...), profesión (...), nivel organizacional (...), misión (...), conocimiento (...) e innovación tecnológica (...). (Bigo, 2008: 19-20)<sup>17</sup>.

Si bien en el Centro de Frontera Iguazú trabajan en conjunto, cada institución tiene como responsabilidad ciertas tareas a cumplir que responden a las funciones que le competen en torno al control fronterizo. La Dirección Nacional de Migraciones se encarga de la aplicación de la normativa estatal migratoria; la Dirección General de Aduanas se hace cargo del despacho aduanero, los sistemas, métodos y procedimientos de control aduanero sobre operaciones de ingreso o salida de mercancías. El Servicio Nacional de Sanidad y Calidad Agroalimentaria tiene como responsabilidad la fiscalización de productos de origen animal y vegetal y todos los procesos de los cuales forman parte; y Gendarmería Nacional Argentina se encarga de la seguridad en los puestos de control y en las rutas nacionales. Es necesario aclarar que las cuatro instituciones tienen una mayor cantidad de funciones a lo largo del territorio nacional pero las mencionadas acá son las que se realizan con mayor frecuencia en regiones fronterizas.

Como analiza Bigo (2008), “para comprender las posiciones y discursos que sitúan a los agentes, es necesario correlacionarlos con su socialización profesional y sus posiciones de autoridad en términos de sus roles como portavoces de ‘instituciones legítimas dentro del campo de los profesionales de la (in)seguridad de la gestión

<sup>17</sup> Traducción propia.

del malestar” (23)<sup>18</sup>. Por ejemplo, ser una zona primaria aduanera, como argumentó el gendarme y como lo especifica la resolución general 288/98 de aduanas, no ubica a las funciones aduaneras en una posición superior, sino más bien habilita que prime el control aduanero de manera articulada con los demás agentes e instituciones allí presentes, a través de los controles migratorios, fitosanitarios y de seguridad. Por una parte, es notablemente visible la diversidad de funciones entre quienes se encuentran en el Centro de Frontera Iguazú pero, por otra parte, también se pueden ver articulaciones, redes y vínculos que confluyen en un amplio espacio de prácticas estatales referidas al control fronterizo.

El proceso de cierre de fronteras y de progresivas aperturas produjo cambios en la ejecución de las actividades que se realizaban y la implementación de nuevas actividades y funciones debido al contexto pandémico. El proceso burocrático del control fronterizo fue una de las primeras respuestas que empleó el estado argentino para quienes transitaban por ese puesto. Mostrar el documento de identidad y el carnet de vacunación, completar una declaración jurada, tener (o no) residencia local, cambios en referencia a las aperturas de pasos fronterizos a través de resoluciones y disposiciones, fueron parte del control fronterizo sobre quienes circulan y se movilizan por el paso fronterizo Iguazú-Foz do Iguazú. Una vez más, se buscó implementar y reconstruir en la práctica cotidiana y a través de la rutina de los agentes estatales, las nociones de orden y control estatal en/sobre las fronteras nacionales.

## **Un abordaje etnográfico sobre/con agentes e instituciones estatales**

¿Cuál sería, entonces, el valor de la perspectiva etnográfica para el análisis de la política en la actualidad? Ante todo, la etnografía permite dotar de contenido a esas abstracciones imprecisas, polisémicas y ambiguas, que son los conceptos de ‘política’, ‘estado’ (...), ‘gobierno’, etc., sin por ello congelarlas tornándolas en nociones estáticas carentes de otra virtud que la de transmutar procesos sociales complejos en (supuestas) entidades reificadas. En efecto, en lugar de intentar vanamente atribuir a cada uno de esos términos un sentido preciso, unívoco e inequívoco, el análisis etnográfico permite dotarlos de múltiples sentidos que, además, no resultan de la especulación teórico-normativa de quien escribe sino del examen detallado de sus usos por parte de actores socialmente situados (Balbi y Boivin, 2008: 10).

Hacer etnografía sobre/con agentes e instituciones del estado es una tarea compleja. Hacerla en las fronteras nacionales, la vuelve aún más compleja. Los permisos, los accesos y las permanencias en una investigación que involucra a aquellas personificaciones y materializaciones del estado se encuentran construidas, disputadas y negociadas permanentemente. Para ello, resulta interesante y de gran aporte el empleo de la etnografía con la intención de llevar a cabo un análisis desmenuzado y profundo sobre los agentes y las instituciones estatales en una región transfronteriza. En cuanto a la etnografía, la misma puede “hacer referencia tanto a textos como a métodos de investigación y a perspectivas analíticas” (Balbi 2012: 485), dándose una interrelación entre los elementos que presenta. Con respecto al uso del método etnográfico, el mismo se encuentra extendido en varias de las ciencias sociales y humanas, y es a través del cual se plantean investigaciones desde un abordaje que genera un quiebre con las divisiones ortodoxas entre las disciplinas. Interpretar, traducir, transcribir, observar, escribir y muchas otras acciones son parte del hacer etnografía. Julieta Quirós (2019) la conceptualiza como “un modo de conocimiento en tanto nos permite conocer dimensiones –acaso recodos y engranajes- de la vida social que de otra manera difícilmente podríamos conocer” (187). Ir al Centro de Frontera, pasar largas horas observando las movildades de quienes lo transitan, tener charlas informales y entrevistas con agentes estatales

<sup>18</sup> Traducción propia.



y con personas que son interpeladas por el control fronterizo, son el conjunto de experiencias que fueron una parte fundamental del análisis desarrollado a lo largo de las páginas para poder mostrar cómo se llevó a cabo el control fronterizo a través del proceso de cierre de fronteras en el contexto de la pandemia de coronavirus.

Por otra parte, es interesante retomar a Diego Zenobi (2010), quien aborda cómo la práctica antropológica da lugar a que los interlocutores lo posicionen y lo construyan a uno en el campo, llegando a ser considerado espía. Ello se debe a que “una vez que el etnógrafo ha pisado suelo nativo al intentar establecer esas relaciones, ha quedado atrapado en las tensiones, conflictos y dinámicas propias del campo en el que desenvolverá su actividad. Las acusaciones públicas suscitadas en el marco del trabajo en terreno confirman que el antropólogo es evaluado de acuerdo con las categorías disponibles en el campo, categorías cuyo sentido deriva de las relaciones y principios que le resultan propios” (Zenobi 2010: 484). Cuando Gustavo Lins Ribeiro (2008) se encontraba investigando acerca de la Entidad Binacional Yacyretá en Ituzaingó, ciudad argentina separada de Paraguay por el río Paraná, fue tratado de espía en una entrevista debido que “a muitos lhes parecia estranho que um antropólogo brasileiro tivesse interesse por uma represa argentino-paraguaia (...), ainda estava fresca a interpretação geopolítica típica da ditadura militar de 1976-1983 que colocava Itaipu, construída a 400 kms rio acima, como a bomba hídrica brasileira<sup>19</sup>” (Ribeiro 2008: 11). Este ejemplo, teniendo en cuenta sus propias particularidades que lo diferencian y distancian del presente análisis, es una clara representación de la multiplicidad de lugares que uno puede llegar a ocupar en las investigaciones desarrolladas sobre/con agentes de instituciones estatales que se encuentran en un puesto de control fronterizo. Hacer etnografía allí habilita a que los interlocutores involucrados construyan una multiplicidad de percepciones de uno como investigador, posibilitando y generando la continua apertura de nuevos caminos que se van ramificando, y es a través del ejercicio etnográfico que se decide cuál o cuáles tomar. La pregunta “¿para qué necesitás esta información?” es el puntapié inicial para posicionarme en el campo como antropólogo y etnógrafo, dando a conocer por qué me encuentro allí, qué me encuentro realizando y por qué considero a esa persona como parte de mi trabajo de investigación. La presencia de uno nunca es imperceptible y las movilidades que se llevan a cabo en el campo, entre algunas prácticas decididas y otras imprevistas, son los caminos que se siguen en la construcción del conocimiento.

## Conclusiones

A lo largo del manuscrito, se buscó discutir sobre la idea reificada de estado, como una entidad superior que se encuentra demarcada de manera estricta por sus límites nacionales, por sus fronteras. Las propuestas de repensar la idea de estado desarrollada por un gran número de investigadores de las ciencias sociales y humanas, contribuyó a que en las páginas previas se tome a los agentes y a las instituciones como aquellos constitutivos de la idea de estado. Ellos son quienes ejercen el poder sobre un territorio determinado, y en el caso del Centro de Frontera Iguazú son cuatro instituciones que se hacen presentes para llevar a cabo sus funciones, con la intención de reconstruir en el día a día la noción de frontera nacional como límite demarcado por su variable geográfica que debe ser controlado. Hacer etnografía allí permite quebrar la imagen estática y fija para dar lugar a la permeabilidad y a las movilidades de las regiones transfronterizas, que no son sólo (co) construidas por los agentes e instituciones estatales, sino que además intervienen todas aquellas personas que circulan en estas regiones, a través de un complejo mundo de relaciones que se transforma en todo momento.

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19 Cursiva propia del autor.

Observaciones, recorridas, cruces, paseos, charlas y entrevistas en dos estancias de trabajo de campo durante el proceso de cierre de fronteras y progresivas aperturas, fueron constitutivas de una parte del trabajo de investigación que aquí se relató. Este artículo es resultado del trabajo de campo realizado en terreno, sumado a la sistematización de documentos estatales y bibliografía relacionada con el tema, además de discusiones que giran en torno a las nociones de fronteras como regiones en las que intervienen una multiplicidad de actores, dinámicas y prácticas. Desde una perspectiva etnográfica fue que se problematizaron los argumentos desarrollados teniendo como guía las preguntas de la introducción: ¿cómo fue llevado a cabo el proceso de cierre de fronteras y progresivas aperturas en el Centro de Frontera Iguazú? ¿cuáles son las prácticas estatales de control fronterizo que formaron parte de este proceso y de qué modo fueron ejecutadas? ¿cómo es la práctica etnográfica con agentes e instituciones estatales?

El lugar del antropólogo no se encuentra desprovisto de prejuicios, desconocimientos e intenciones, pero hacer consciente esa posición cargada de subjetividad es la que permite hacer etnografía como construcción de un conocimiento situado. La burocracia del control fronterizo, la espera continua, el mantenimiento del secreto de los datos sensibles, el repetir el monólogo de presentación una y otra vez a cada persona que ingresa en la misma oficina, son apenas la punta del iceberg de cómo funcionan las instituciones estatales encargadas del control fronterizo y cómo es hacer etnografía con agentes que forman parte de ellas.

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# What to do with teenage sexuality? The anthropology of forms of government in Brazil

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## **Abstract**

This article discusses how the Brazilian Ministry for Women, the Family and Human Rights operates in relation to the prevention of so-called “teenage pregnancy”, analysing the Ministry’s political strategies, directives, initiatives for conversation with society-at-large, and campaigns for engaging their target public. We find, at the interstices of state bureaucracy, peculiar ways of dealing with and erasing teenage sexuality and gender markers that bear on teenage socialization, both of which are constitutive dimensions of these subjects, in favour of an idyllic family ethos which is contrasted to the sociocultural, material and symbolic dimensions that weave relations between generations within the domestic sphere. Childhood and self-care become central to government rhetoric, mobilizing conservative strategies that stem from an alarmist outlook which remains restricted to the private domain, singling out the (cis)heteronormative family – rather than schools – as the *locus* for sexuality education.

**Key words:** teenage pregnancy; sexuality; gender; reproduction; family; State.

# O que fazer com a sexualidade adolescente?

## Antropologia das formas de governo no Brasil

### Resumo

O artigo discute as formas de atuação do Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos, no que concerne à chamada prevenção da “gravidez precoce”, analisando suas estratégias políticas, diretrizes de governo, iniciativas de diálogo com a sociedade civil e campanhas de mobilização do público ao qual se dirigem as ações do Estado. Nos interstícios da burocracia estatal, gestam-se modos peculiares de enfrentamento e de apagamento das sexualidades adolescentes, bem como das marcas de gênero que incidem em sua socialização, como dimensões constitutivas destes sujeitos, em prol de um ethos familiar idílico que se contrapõe às dimensões socioculturais, materiais e simbólicas, que integram as relações entre gerações no espaço doméstico. A infância e o autocuidado adquirem centralidade nos discursos governamentais, mobilizando estratégias conservadoras derivadas de um enfoque alarmista e restrito ao âmbito privado, ao eleger a família (cis)heteronormativa, e não as escolas, como lócus da educação em sexualidade.

**Palavras-chave:** gravidez na adolescência; sexualidade; gênero; reprodução; família; Estado.

# What to do with teenage sexuality?

## The anthropology of forms of government in Brazil

*Elaine Reis Brandão*

### **Introduction**

This article sits within the field of studies usually called “reproductive governance”, which considers that sexuality and reproduction are woven and permeated by the cultural stamp of a given historical and socio-political configuration. In a recent analysis of the theme (Brandão and Cabral, 2021) we retrieved the original formulation of the concept by the feminist anthropologists Lynn Morgan and Elizabeth Roberts (2012: 243):

the mechanisms through which different historical configurations of actors – such as state institutions, churches, donor agencies, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – use legislative controls, economic inducements, moral injunctions, direct coercion, and ethical incitements to produce, monitor and control reproductive behaviours and practices.<sup>1</sup>

As we claimed, the concept of “reproductive governance” is not new, much like the multiple connections which exist between race, social class, reproduction, gender, sexuality, health and the (nation) state (Brandão and Cabral, 2021: 52). The challenge before us is to elucidate the contemporary forms of these socio-technical and political strategies, in close dialogue with discourse on human rights.

Within debates on this theme, Fonseca et al. (2021: 12) point to Morgan and Robert’s insistence, in what pertains to Latin American studies, on so-called “moral regimes”, which, “due to global logics which pervade national strategies of intervention, exert a normative influence on practices of reproduction, sexual behaviour and gender relations”. In Foucault’s (1999, 2008) terms, and in those of authors who have developed his theories (Fassin & Memmi, 2004), such “moral regimes” are ways of governing bodies and subjecting them to the laws of the State.

If, at the time, we broached the matter of contraception, and in particular of long-acting reversible contraception, under the lens of this conceptual and political framework, our focus is now on the “moral regimes” that dominate the federal government’s management of so-called “premature sexual risk”. In contradiction to the urgency and gravity of unintentional pregnancy, in particular in a country which does not consider abortion to be a woman’s right, the ministerial office, headed by Pastor Damares Alves, “mocks” the theme, infantilizing youth and teenagers, stripping them of the teaching of sexuality and gender. In order to gauge the importance of unintentional pregnancy in different contexts, at both a local and global scale, a recent report of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2022) draws attention to the theme, stressing the need to make visible an “invisible” social fact. This situation tends to be aggravated during crises, pandemics, humanitarian conflicts, and so forth. According to the report, unintentional pregnancy is directly related to

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<sup>1</sup> In a recent article, Morgan (2019: 113) rewrites the preceding definition: “[...] refers to the mechanisms through which different historical configuration of actors – such as state, religious, and international financial institutions, NGOs, and social movements – use legislative controls, economic inducements, moral injunctions, direct coercion, and ethical incitements to produce, monitor, and control reproductive behaviors and population practices”.



social development and to inequality of gender within a territory or nation. A study covering 96% of the world's teenage population has observed that, within the set of the world's least developed countries, almost one in every three young women between the ages of 20 and 24 had become mothers during adolescence (between 10 and 19 years of age), the majority being around 17 years of age (UNFPA, 2022: 115). In Brazil, between 2004 and 2020, birth rates for teenagers were at around 49 per 1000 girls aged between 15 and 19 (UNFPA, 2022: 126).

Despite a political agenda in defence of sexual and reproductive rights (Corrêa and Petchesky, 1996) which finds echo in other Latin American countries<sup>2</sup>, The Ministry of Women, the Family and Human Rights (Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos, henceforth MMFDH) conjoins an anti-gender rhetoric (Bulgarelli and Almeida, 2022; Miguel, 2021; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018; Junqueira, 2018)<sup>3</sup> with a pro-life initiative, taking the (cisgender) heteronormative family (rather than the individual subject) as the idyllic matrix, the locus of matrimonial and filial love.

The effacement of inequalities of class, race/ethnicity, gender, generation, and sexual orientation is the more immediate corollary of government actions centred on the family which silence the multiple conflicts that exist among its members, charging it with “educating” children and teenagers to find “matrimonial love”. The proximity of representatives of the ministry with the movements that promote pre-marital celibacy is not random.<sup>4</sup> The Biblical trope of feminine chastity is the basis of the moral regime that informs initiatives seeking to curb “premature sexual risk”, focusing on women (girls and mothers) and the “mismanagement of flesh” that is believed to be at the root of “premature” reproduction.

In her ethnographic study of the *Eu escolhi esperar* Movement (I chose to wait Movement), Terassi Hortelan (2018, 2020) shows how aspiration to joy in marriage is intertwined with the ideal of romantic love and the gender grammar that reifies the traditional roles of women in the family. Suppressing sex before marriage becomes a path towards a healthy, monogamous, and indissoluble cisgender heterosexual relationship. As she states: “by means of technologies of the self, which aim for the self-government “of flesh”: princes and princesses are thus individuals capable of self-government aspiring to the projects of amorous achievements” (2018: 273). Promoting values such as “sexual purity” and “emotional health”, a pedagogy of affect is activated so that “waiting” (pre-marital sexual abstinence) becomes a choice for “true liberty” (Hortelan, 2020). We will see how this rhetoric of “sexual preservation” recurrently emerges in the documents analysed here.

This article thus aims to question and unveil the government strategies implemented in Brazil during the last years that seek to inhibit teenage pregnancy, articulating them with a wider moral and religious conservatism that pervades the government of president Jair Bolsonaro.

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2 Abortion, it should be noted, was decriminalized in Argentina (2020), Mexico (2021), and Colombia (2022). Chile has summoned a new Constitutional Assembly which may rewrite abortion legislation.

3 A number of studies have investigated conservative, anti-gender invectives at the international and local levels, presupposing a partnership between Catholic and Evangelical religious groups in order to restore traditional values by denying sexual and gender diversity. These movements are furthermore in collusion with the political agenda of the far right.

4 On the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 2019, a congress held in the house of representatives, promoted by the Ministry, discussed the postponement of the sexual initiation of teenagers, inspired by the religious initiative ([www.euescolhiesperar.com](http://www.euescolhiesperar.com)) and the North American Ascend, represented by its president, Mary Anne Mosack, ([weascend.org/about-us/](http://weascend.org/about-us/)). Ascend is a social organization active in Sexual Risk Avoidance Education Programs. A bill of law (n. 813/2019) is being considered in the São Paulo state legislature, signed by the Evangelical city councillor Rinaldi Digilio (PSL), which would instate the “I choose to wait” week to prevent and raise awareness of premature pregnancy (São Paulo, 2019).

## Methodological Inspirations

The theme defined above is developed through anthropological research following the method of ethnography with documents. This method is itself inspired by anthropological studies of public administration and governance (Teixeira & Lima, 2010; Vianna, 2013; Fonseca et al., 2016; Ferreira and Lowenkron, 2020) and ways of governing bodies and populations (Foucault, 1999, 2008; Fassin & Memmi, 2004) as materialized in the normative dimensions which penetrate the quotidian of political institutions and those who use them by means of vast documentation. By poring over the values and meanings of ways of governing, we also scan the “two-way fabrication of gender and the State” (Viana & Lowenkron, 2017). What are the predominant discursive forms? What moral grammar surrounds such initiatives? Which semantics are used to rename consolidated social practices? How do “discursive practices on ‘good’ sex, ‘good’ gender, and the ‘good’ State” (Vianna & Lowenkron, 2017: 6) incite discriminations and inequality? According to Vianna and Lowenkron (2017: 50), “the quotidian of administrative instances that make themselves the State in the lives of people is shot through with pedagogies of inequality of every order, including gender”. What prudish pedagogy and rhetoric does the MMFDH activate and make resound in the public that their actions target?

To capture the “State in action”, public policies in movement, the social groups that they target, to attend to in the day to day of their practices of administration, the role of civil religious institutions in formulating government policies – these are the challenges which our analysis must meet. Even if members of the MMFDH do not recognise ‘gender’ as an analytical and political category, its absence in documents is indicative of what it seeks to deny or make invisible.

This article queries documents coming from the MMFDH, some in partnerships with the Ministries of Education, Health, Citizenship, and presidential decrees, all of which, in my view, consolidate the familial ideal (Miotto et al., 2015; Moraes et al., 2020) predominant in the federal government’s public battle against teenage pregnancy. These documents attest to a set of bureaucratic strategies, ranging from notices of public funding for research aimed at strengthening families, to financial support for municipal public policies that support families, audio-visual campaigns in the media, monitoring and surveillance in schools, and the *disque denúncia* (Disque Direitos Humanos 100), a hotline for reporting human rights violation, as well as other strategies for garnering resources and institutional agencies for the desired moral and familial reordering.

The documents analysed are publicly available on the internet, and they mostly concern the theme of sexuality and the prevention of teenage pregnancy. I will first focus on the National Strategy for Strengthening Family Ties (Estratégia Nacional de Fortalecimento dos Vínculos Familiares), which was the object of a presidential decree (Brasil, 2020a). I consider this to be the main inspiration for subsequent policies aimed at the family, since it states the main operational directives of the MMFDH. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 2021, an inter-ministerial ordinance created a working group to draft the National Plan for the Primary Prevention of Premature Sexual Risk and Teenage Pregnancy (Brasil, 2022a), published in February 2022, alongside two other statements which complement the guidelines for action on this front (Brasil, 2022b, 2022c).

The Bolsonaro government, it should be recalled, created in the National Week for the Prevention of Teenage Pregnancy in 2019, through law n°. 13.798, signed on January 2019. The Week is observed every year in the first week of February.<sup>5</sup> In January 2020, public debate on the undesired effects of “teenage pregnancy” was promoted through a partnership between the MMFDH and the Ministry Health (MS), using the slogan “Adolescence first, pregnancy later – everything in its time”. Despite not explicitly adopting the expression “sexual abstinence”, perhaps due to its widespread rejection and the criticism it had received from specialists and healthcare

<sup>5</sup> Since the school year begins in February, PL n° 4.883/2020, which is being discussed in the National Congress, hope to instate the National Week for the Prevention of Teenage Pregnancy for the week that falls on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September, a date in which over 70 countries observe the Global Day for the Prevention of Teenage Pregnancy.

professionals, the underlying appeal of a delayed start to sexuality set the agenda of the campaign. We have elsewhere analysed in greater detail the two conflicting perspectives on teenage sexuality: one a more comprehensive approach, and another which is more controlling (Cabral and Brandão, 2020).

Other ethnographic work has also focused on the material explored here, dealing with how to qualify/discriminate the (young) women who make use of social infrastructure, such as day cares or basic health units, defined as “teens”, “nervous moms” (Fernandes, 2017, 2019) or “difficult patients” (Milanezi, 2019), thereby reiterating the non-compliance of these women to the public policies that are offered to them as a “gift” rather than a right. Finally, Corossacz (2009) and Faya-Robles (2015) are also sources of inspiration for my research on the theme of reproduction in Brazil.

As we will see, the analytical and political framing of the problem of “teenage pregnancy” blurs into an emphasis on the purported risks of “premature” sexual activity between two cisgender heterosexual persons, fuelling the atmosphere of moral panic that surrounds teenage sexuality. Instead of promoting opportunities that allow teenagers to prepare themselves for sexual experiences with others, this only generates more fear. It is only coexistence and debate with peers that enables learning the many idioms that pervade social relations between men and women, such as gender, race and class hierarchies, violence, monetary exchanges, and sexual and gender diversity.

This article is thus structured in the following way: it begins with an analysis of the impact of the MMFDH, which places at the centre of its agenda public policies for the family and for individual subjects in their specificities and inequalities. This turn is central to understanding the backdrop to their initiatives against “teenage pregnancy”. I then move on to the National Plan for the Primary Prevention of Premature Sexual Risk and Teenage Pregnancy, so that we may pinpoint the main strategies for engaging children and teenagers under the care of their families. Finally, I consider some paths for reflection that remain uncharted, by way of a process of constituting “new” norms in relation to the health of teenagers, in particular in what pertains to their sexual and reproductive dimensions.

### **An emphasis on the family as the *locus* of government social intervention**

The Ministry of Women, the Family, and Human Rights (MMFDH) is today the main articulator of anti-gender policies in Brazil, operating in distinct social areas.<sup>6</sup> A wide set of political and public initiatives have sought to convert the family into the central nucleus of state intervention since the Presidential Decree nº 10.570, published on the 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2020 (Brasil, 2020a), which instituted the National Strategy for Strengthening Family Ties and established an inter-ministerial committee to monitor it.<sup>7</sup> This committee is presided by the minister of the MMFDH, gathering representatives of the ministries of Citizenship, of Health, of Education, and the Executive Office of the President, with a deadline of one year to implement its policies. The executive secretary of this inter-ministerial committee has been occupied by the National Secretary of the Family, the Catholic lawyer Angela Gandra.

6 Other ministries are also involved in this moral crusade against so-called “gender ideology”, including the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Education, and Health. However, Damares Alves’ persistence in the role during all of Jair Bolsonaro’s term, in contrast to her changing colleagues in other ministries, no doubt places her at the head of this political aim.

7 The full text of the decree can be consulted at: [https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/\\_Ato2019-2022/2020/Decreto/D10570.htm](https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_Ato2019-2022/2020/Decreto/D10570.htm)

Along with the creation of the National Family Observatory<sup>8</sup>, of a National School of the Family<sup>9</sup>, of public notices of support for research that seeks to strengthen public policies which target the family, and the Coordinating Agency for Advanced Training in Graduate Education (CAPES) of the Ministry of Education (Brasil, 2021a), the MMFDH acts in two fronts to garner support for its agenda: through the municipal public sphere and through private ventures. The Family-Friendly Municipal Programme (Programa Município Amigo da Família (PMAF)), instated by decree nº 1.756 and put into effect on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 2020, is an initiative that seeks to promote acts that implement public policies focused on the family and which strengthen marital and intergenerational bonds. An Award for Good Practices in Municipal Family Policies was also instated (Brasil, 2020b). The Family Public Policies guidebook (Brasil, 2020c), aimed at city managers, clarifies the requisite procedures for participating in the Program. Hoping for support from the private sector, the Family-Work Equilibrium Programme, instated by Bill nº 2.904, signed on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 2020 (Brasil, 2020d), aims to find an equilibrium between family and the workplace by means of continuing education, the creation of the “A family-friendly business” seal, and the Award for Best Practices in Work-Family Equilibrium. A noteworthy feature is how the MMFDH allows for partnerships between public or private jural persons, opening up the possibility of establishing alliances with multiple religious institutions which are active in various social fields, including therapeutic communities, missionary activities, education, creation and development of public policies for social aide, the protection of childhood/youth, and so forth.

Two further initiatives of the MMFDH are relevant to the theme of this article. First, the Education and Family Programme, created by bill nº 571, passed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 2021 by the Ministry of Education, known as “Family in School” (Brasil, 2021b), which, among many initiatives which seek to involve families in their children’s school life and educational institutions, promised to create the “Dial School” app, through which families could consult the educational content taught to children and teenagers. Monitoring what goes on in public schools in order to filter content which the MMFDH considers to be inadequate to the socialization of children and teenagers, has been a recurring strategy of the present government. Second, the “Strong Families” Programme<sup>10</sup> (Brasil, 2021c), which, adapting methodologies developed in European and North American contexts, allows the MMFDH to launch or update programmes and initiatives that seek to strengthen family ties. As the Programme’s website stresses:<sup>11</sup>

“Various studies have demonstrated that an improvement in the quality of family relations, through honing parental and socioeconomic capabilities, favours the healthy development of children and teenagers, reducing risky behaviours such as alcohol and drug consumption, truancy, involvement in violence, premature sexual initiation and teenage pregnancy”.

As its website makes clear, the “Strong Families” Programme (2021c) is configured by a “methodology of seven weekly meetings for families with children between 10 and 14 years of age that seeks to promote the wellbeing of family members, strengthening process of protecting and constructing family resilience and reducing risks related to problematic behaviour”.

8 The Observatory’s page reads: “A service of the federal government, under the supervision of the National Secretary of the Family, which aims to foment, produce and disseminate scientific knowledge on the family, strengthening conversations between the academic community, public policy makers concerned with the family, and the many actors involved with this theme”.

9 This is a virtual platform that seeks to further the continuing education of parents/caretakers and professionals interested in the theme of the family and parental education. Its aim is to strengthen family ties and to promote qualified instruction on the themes of the family and parental education.

10 This is an adaptation, to the Brazilian context, of the *Strengthening Families Programme* (SFP-UK), drafted by the Oxford Brookes School of Health and Social Care. It aims to aide youth with substance abuse problems. As of 2019, its coordination has been transferred to the MMFDH.

11 Available at: <http://www.gov.br/mdh/pt-br/navegue-por-temas/familia/familias-fortes-1>

We can see that a clear strategy of the federal government, particularly the MMFDH, is the disarticulation of organized civil society, instituting a single (natural) model of social organization – the family. The family is, of course, understood to be derived from the union of a cisgender heterosexual couple and their descendant and ascendant kin. Emphasis has been placed on overtures to religious institutions that support the Bolsonaro government, participate in educational processes, are attentive to healthcare and social aid for families. Such a presence depoliticizes and de-professionalizes the work of government agencies in the eyes of citizens.

The Report on the Anti-Gender Offensive in Brazil (SPW 2021), a document submitted to the United Nations Independent Expert on Protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, elaborated by various nongovernmental organizations in 2021, synthesizes some of the directives of the MMFDH:

1. The promotion of municipal policies for strengthening and monitoring family structures through newly-established local mechanisms that rely on the support of religious organizations;
2. A national public call for registering partnerships with religious entities in the MMFDH's development policies;
3. Establishment of a training platform for forming local 'tutelary councillors' qualified to implement the MMFDH's directives for family policies. By means of learning at a distance strategies, the MMFDH will offer various courses centred on the "Strong Families" programme;
4. The Establishment of a new line of financial investments of the MMFDH to 'form human resources in strategic areas' and to improve social science research on the family and related policies, in partnership with the Coordinating Agency for Advanced Training in Graduate Education (CAPES) of the Ministry of Education (SPW 2021: 22).

According to the Sexuality Policy Observatory (SPW, 2021: 18), the struggle against "gender ideology" and the promotion of "traditional values" are central to the National Policy of Human Rights. This led to a crucial turn in the protection of subjects deemed to be "vulnerable". The human rights rhetoric is no longer restricted to the human person, in her autonomy, liberty and individuality, having been redirected to the (cisgender heterosexual) family as a moral value that needs to be protected. A vast linguistic and political repertoire is being constructed to obliterate teenagers as right-bearing subjects (Leite, 2013) in their sexual and reproductive experiences. Control over the temporality of sexual initiation has been the main government strategy, hedging its bets on the delay of the start of sexuality, appealing to parents and caretakers as partners in this moral endeavour.

A resignification of "human rights" is being promoted, based on the exclusion of premises dear to so-called sexual rights and reproductive rights (Correa & Petchesky, 1996; Carrara & Vianna, 2008; Vianna & Lacerda, 2004), including sex and gender diversity, reproductive autonomy, abortion, and secular sexual education. A concrete example of this trend is the creation of a new "taxonomy" to guide the work of the Ministry's National Regulator of Human Rights (Brasil, 2020e). The manual contains a new classification of crimes, in which the vocabulary of gender is notably absent.

Contrary to what one might have imagined, "family public policies" do not concern themselves with redistributive social policies or cash-transfer programmes, with ending hunger or poverty, or even with settling families in rural properties. For a policy to be deemed to be oriented toward the 'family' in the context of this ideology, it must aim to strengthen the (hierarchical) structure of the ties between family members. This may seem naïve, even childish, were it not for the fact that the focus on family relations is a subterfuge for suppressing government investment in education, health, the environment, culture, jobs, and food safety.

A structural view of society and its development is thereby substituted by a simplistic, voluntaristic, and reductionist conception which finds in the social relations of families the origin of “social problems” which affect the wider collectivity, society and the State. According to this neoliberal conception, public space is ordered by a private, family-centred and religious logic.

In alliance with municipal authorities and civil society (religious) organizations, the expansion of family public policies in Brazil transfers the root of all evil to the precarity of family ties, which is said to result in violence, criminality, truancy, alcohol and substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and so forth. In the available documents, the ideal family format is the cisgender heterosexual couple with their sons and daughters. There is no discussion of gender hierarchy, plural models of the family, nor of the many family configurations that we find in demographical or anthropological studies, where ties of affinity and consanguinity cut across each other (grandparents and their grandchildren, women heads of households, a couple with their children and grandchildren, etc., homosexual couples with their children, among others).

A range of notices for partnerships with CAPES and the Ministry of Education were announced to fund research on policies for the family. These are in consonance with the government’s dismantling of scientific research and technological innovation, as well as the political persecution of the social and human sciences, particularly in light of their typically critical position against the federal government’s infringement of human rights (of the rights of Indigenous peoples, maroons, rural workers, peripheral populations in urban centres, and others). Going against research that social scientists have carried out for decades, dealing with inequalities of class, race, ethnicity, and gender in Brazil, the MMFDH intends to ban “Marxist” influences and with they call “gender ideology” in favour of an ethnocentric and religious view of just what a ‘family’ is supposed to be.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, we see how the State has reorganized itself against gender and its instability and flux – which invites us to inhabit society alongside the existence of multiple bodies – by stabilizing and fixing finely delimited categories (masculine x feminine; man x women; adult x child) and re-articulating them, within the family, in alignment with the order of nature and the divine.

## Preventing “premature sexual risk”

The development of my argument requires an investigation into the normative and political markers of what is called the National Plan for the Primary Prevention of Premature Sexual Risk and Teenage Pregnancy, launched in February 2022, as a joint initiative of the MMFDH and Ministries of Health, Education, and Citizenship (Brasil, 2022a). There are two accompanying guides to this Plan, which I will also take under analysis. These are the Selfcare Guide: Recommendations for the Prevention of Premature Sexual Risk and Teenage Pregnancy (Brasil, 2022b) and the Orientation Guide on the Prevention of Premature Sexualization in Early Infancy (Brasil, 2022c). The presentation of the latter guide, prepared by the National Secretary for Early Infancy Care, itself linked to the Special Secretary of Social Development of the Ministry of Citizenship, begins thus: “The Federal Government’s motto is: God, Country and Family”. The secularity of the democratic, lawful State has imploded and is constantly called into question.

Since the start of the moral crusade against what (Catholic and Evangelical) conservative and religious sectors call “gender ideology”, children and teenagers have been seen to be a priority group in terms of which public opinion is mobilized regarding the perils of public debate on sexuality and gender, particularly in schools, insofar as these themes are deemed to incite sexual initiation and conversation to homosexuality,

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<sup>12</sup> The latest initiative of the MMFDH, through the National Secretary of Women’s Policies, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of June 2022, was public notice nº 01 with the certification of an Ambassador for the Mothers of Brazil Programme, seeking out a volunteer for “the integral protection of the exercise of maternity and the promotion of the right to life from conception until natural death, observing birth rights through policies of responsible paternity, family planning and pregnancy care”. For further details, see Brasil 2022d.

as well as to blur gender differences. Vanessa Leite (2019) has shown that the defence of a puerile and idealized childhood condenses, within it, discourses on the risks that threaten its corruption, or those which would swerve it towards “evil” (leaving it exposed to abuse and paedophilia), which emerge as recurrent tropes in public debates (Lowenkron, 2015; Balieiro, 2017).

It is this not by chance that institutional agents choose this line of intervention when faced with what is designated as “premature sexual risk”. The extract below summarizes the evils that may come to corrupt “minors”:

The launch of this National Plan is aligned with the importance of capacitating the different target audiences (family, society, and State) so that they can deal with the theme of childhood and juvenile sexuality, focusing on the benefits of sexual preservation, particularly in the country’s current sociocultural conjunction, which has witnessed an increase in the exhibition of bodies and in sexualizing behaviours, which, in turn, results in the premature sexual stimulus of children and teenagers (Brasil, 2022a: 8).

The thesis of “premature sexual risk” is taken to be responsible for possible pregnancy, defined thusly: “the exhibition of children and teenagers and sexualizing stimuli and/or behaviours that can bring about harm to the health, wellbeing, and development of these individuals” (Brasil, 2022a: 23). The general aim of the Plan is “to include, in Brazilian public policies and other public or private initiatives, an approach to the risks and consequences of premature sexualization and teenage pregnancy, in an inter-sectorial way and based on the human rights of children and teenagers” (Brasil, 2022a: 24). What stands out in the Plan, and specifically in its specific aims, is the absence of basic social markers for working with the teenage population, one which lives in extremely diverse and unequal conditions, including those of sexual diversity, gender, race/ethnicity and social class. Strategically, the Plan mentions policies aimed at stigma and prejudice regarding the expression of sexuality among people with special needs, and of widening the access of traditional peoples and communities to services that seek to prevent premature sexual risk and teenage pregnancy (Brasil, 2022a: 24).

Within the conceptual markers of the Plan, we again find no mention of gender, only of sexuality, sexual health and comprehensive education in sexuality. The same is true of the glossary of the Selfcare Guide: Recommendations for the Prevention of Premature Sexual Risk and Teenage Pregnancy (Brasil, 2022b). These documents emphasise the risks of “premature sexualization” or of the “premature start to sexual life” without defining the precise meanings of the terms being used. There is no clear definition of what “premature” means in terms of the sexual experiences of teenagers and youth. Just what “premature” stands for seems very vague/ imprecise: “the age or condition in which the child does not yet have the physical and psychic elements to adequately understand the stimuli received” (Brasil, 2022a: 23). The fact that learning about one’s sexuality is processual, relational, slow, and involves affective and sexual exchanges that mould subjective experiences during adolescence is ignored (Heilborn et al., 2006).

Strategic axis III of the Plan, concerned with the sensibilization and engagement of teenagers, proposes to: “Create a website to provide information on sexual health and education in sexuality and affectivity for teenagers, **in view of sexual preservation**” (Brasil, 2022a: 31). Strategic axis V, on the role of the family, proposes: “To launch a module on Education on Sexuality and Affectivity in the course for families of the Family in School Project, **geared toward the preservation of sexual integrity** in early infancy and early adolescence” (Brasil, 2022a: 33).<sup>13</sup> These are some of the examples of the multiple sociotechnical and political dispositifs that articulate an inter-sectorial operation which reaches many swathes of the target public. The recurring emphasis on the category of “sexual preservation” within the set of the material analysed here leaves implicit, but at the same time evident, that the legitimacy of sexual activity is restricted to the family environment – that is,

<sup>13</sup> The reader can have an idea of the course and the modules available at this time in: <https://avamec.mec.gov.br/#/instituicao/snf/curso/14476/informacoes>

it is related to marriage. There can be no more inadequate approach to convincing teenagers than one which denies them the value of their repertoire of experiences and knowledge, convincing them to guard themselves, or to “preserve themselves”, for the future.

Intriguingly, the Plan makes no mention of the National Council of the Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents (Conselho Nacional de Defesa dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente (CONANDA)), in its capacity as an agency linked to the theme of the Plan. Indeed, the CONADA convened the XI National Conference of the Rights of Children and Adolescents in 2020, and planning a further conference, which are social spaces for conversation and debates on the theme of teenage pregnancy.<sup>14</sup> Among the many non-government organizations that are listed as participating in this process of collective elaboration, there is no organization that acts in the area of sexual and reproductive health with teenagers, though Brazil has many who are experienced in this area. There is the Brazilian Paediatric Society, the Association of Parents and Friends of Special Needs People, the United Nations Fund for Childhood, the Municipal Managers Teaching Union, among other with less experience of working with teenagers. Among the members of congress referred to which contributed to drafting the Plan we find the Christian congressman Diego Garcia, from the state of Paraná, of the Partido Republicanos (Republicans Party), current president of the Parliamentary Front in Defence of Life and the Family, the congresswomen Paula Belmonte, from the Federal District, of the Partido da Cidadania (Citizenship Party), and Leandre Dal Ponte, also from Paraná, currently with the Partido Social Democrático (Social Democratic Party), president of the Mixed Parliamentary Front for Early Childhood. The document also mentions a public consultation for the participation of interested members of the public, but this does not seem to have been widely notified, and was only made available for a very short period of only ten days in January of 2022.

A webinar called “Adolescence first, pregnancy later” (#everythinginitstime) was held in February of 2021, as part of the process of drafting the Plan. The edited volume released by the National Secretary for the Rights of Children and Teenagers (Secretaria Nacional dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente (SNDCA)), part of the MMFDH, lists the panellists. Its Presentation reads: “The aim is to include in the central axis **the physical and socio-emotional preservation of children and teenagers**, the involvement of families, stimuli to the establishment of healthy, non-violent relationships, and responsible decision-making” (Brasil 2021d: 6). Having researched the theme of teenage pregnancy for over twenty years, I can safely say that the participants are complete strangers to the field.<sup>15</sup> It is highly likely that their participation owed more to the ethical-political values that guide the MMFDH than to their theoretical and technical competence.

Appropriately, De Vito and Prado (2019) and Prado et al. (2021: 6) make use of the “notion of depuration as a metaphor for the processes of removing or purifying themes which are considered to be abject, particularly those pertaining to sexuality and gender, and to the human rights agenda, as part of a movement of “moral cleansing” which seeks to be opposed to an understanding of the gender field of production”.<sup>16</sup> There is, no doubt, a purification of the meanings linked to sexuality, shorn of its erotic, sensual and exciting dimensions, in favour of a sexuality that must be submitted to matrimony lest it be fated to cause (physical, moral, emotional, psychic) damage. To avoid such presumed risks, “premature sexualization” must be prevented, “delaying” the start of sexual life until, it would seem, marriage and the constitution of the family.

14 The only agencies which are mentioned as participating in the Plan are: The National Council for the Rights of People with Disabilities (Conselho Nacional dos Direitos da Pessoa com Deficiência (CONADE)); National Council of Education Secretaries (Conselho Nacional de Secretários da Educação (CONSED)); National Council of Traditional Peoples and Communities (Conselho Nacional dos Povos e Comunidades Tradicionais (CONCPCT)).

15 Participating in the webinar were: Larissa Ferraz Reis, a psychologist and PhD candidate at the Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp); Mercedes Figueroa, professor and international panellist; Dorita Porto, an MPhil in Matrimony and the Family from the University of Navarra, in Spain; and Élisson S. Santos, psychologist and a specialist in Existential Analysis and Logotherapy. Cf. Brasil 2021d.

16 Much like Mary Douglas (1976) studied the contrasting notions of purity and danger, we also find, in this case, a frequent association between the terms “sexual purity” or “sexual preservation” as proper ways of experiencing sexuality and upkeeping Christian values, in contrast to the dangers derived from “premature” sexual initiation.



By emphasising the strengthening of family ties, the anti-gender grammar (Bulgarelli & Almeida, 2022; Miguel, 2021; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Junqueira, 2018), which remains subliminal in the documents under analysis, flattens these very ties within the family unit, as if it were a homogenous social group free of conflicts and inequalities of various orders. Dealing with sexuality and gender seems, rather blatantly, to provoke the destruction of the family, or at least of its idyllic image as created by institutional agents. As Prado et al (2021: 14) stress, “panic over the sexual and gender diversity, particularly in relation to infancy and education, becomes, more than a point of controversy and political bargaining, a strategy for governance”.

The Plan’s efforts to express the deviation, from adolescence to infancy, as the very focus of the problem it sets itself, is in agreement with the sedimented rhetoric of the threat of the moral corruption of children, of conversion to premature sex, the dangers of paedophilia, etc... Thus, the emphasis on “premature sexualization” in infancy at the very least obscures the need to openly discuss with teenagers their sexuality and ways of ensuring their health against sexually transmitted diseases and teenage pregnancy, and of protecting themselves from gender violence.

An emphasis on a strategy of (psychological, emotional, physical, spiritual, social) selfcare is in alignment with a teaching strategy that privileges the domestic environment, outside of school premises, undertaken by parents or tutors with their children. This method of teaching is promoted by the Ministry of Education and the MMFDH. The federal government, which released a manual on home schooling in May of 2021 (Brasil, 2021e), in the hope of stimulating public debate on regulating it as law by means of a bill that is currently being considered by the Federal Senate after having been approved by the House of Representatives. Transferring responsibility over social protection and State support to individuals and families through techniques of self-teaching, self-knowledge, self-protection, and self-care seems to ensure the resolution of all social dramas that afflict us. For Dominique Memmi (2004, 2010), these efforts at social control that permeate health professionals, and are transferred to patients who must carry out a “guided self-evaluation”, can be called “delegated biopolitics”

In brief, there is no discussion on ways of experiencing childhood and adolescence in collective and public spaces, such as day cares, schools, cultural and sports centres, recreation areas; there is no recognition of the fact that many families are responsible for the perpetuation of violence, for the discrimination of its members, for the suffering of children and teenagers who, in general, experience conditions of misery, abandonment, and inequality in diverse spheres. Authority and parental education are taken to be privileged ways of containing children, coercing them into respecting the “right” time to start sexuality – to wit, after marriage. To ensure that families fulfil their task regarding the sexual avoidance of children, the State expands its dispositifs of vigilance and control (Tutelary Councils, schools, hotlines, etc...). We have repeatedly witnessed in the news parents complaining of teachers who disrespect established norms – that is, who speak to their students, in the classroom, about themes that refer to sexuality and gender; of the forced removal of children from their mothers, who are considered to be inept (Alves, 2020); forced marriages and sexual violence; pressure to use long-term contraception; among other government initiatives that indicate the extent to which the autonomy and liberty of children, teenagers, women and transgendered people are relegated in favour of the reification of a patriarchal, hierarchical, misogynist and exclusive model of the family that is underscored by ministerial discourse.

## Final Thoughts

The National Plan for the Primary Prevention of Premature Sexual Risk and Teenage Pregnancy is extremely ambitious, tracing numerous medium-term and long-term strategies. Many lines of engagement remain to be developed in the future. This means that the task of decoding and unravelling the ruses of the MMFDH and its partners is only beginning. As examples, we can refer to certain activities that remain to be put into practice: “publishing a document providing protocols for an approach to responsible sexuality and family planning for teenagers suited to agents of Primary Healthcare”; “releasing a Thematic Coursebook for Sexual Health”; or new health booklets for teenagers. Curiously, the Plan previews the drafting of a National Policy for the Health of Teenagers within the time frame of twenty-four months, despite the fact that Brazil already has such a policy, elaborated with the input of NGOs (Brasil, 2010). This boycotting of past experiences of participative government and of the role of non-religious specialists (scientists, educators, researchers) deprives society of the benefit of the vast knowledge that has been produced on the theme, takes up public resources and fails to reach the target public, namely teenagers and youth. A range of studies have shown that religious affiliation does not necessarily inform intimate behaviour regarding sexuality and reproduction, as is the case, for example, with the practice of abortion in Brazil (Diniz, Medeiros & Madeiro, 2017).

The government strategy of holding families responsible, delaying the start of sexuality, attributing the start of the interest in sexuality to the ease of access to digital content of a sexual nature, is bound to fail. The MMFDH’s regulation of teenage sexuality in terms of “responsibility”, submitting it to a relationship of commitment between a man and a woman, reiterates Carrara’s (2015) reflection on the conflict-ridden process of making different social subjects into citizens – in the case of this study, teenagers and their sexual and reproductive rights.

By discussing sexual policies in Brazil and their peculiar means of moral regulation, Carrara (2015) stresses continuities and ruptures between a Christian sexual morality and what he calls a secular sexuality regime, which gradually moves toward holding subjects responsible for their sexual desires. Carrara stresses how the dimensions of holding oneself responsible and self-control come to the foreground, by analysing transformations in sexuality, constituted by an anatomo-politics of bodies and a biopolitics of populations which walks a tightrope between sexuality linked to reproduction and sexuality as pleasure and a form of subjectification, consolidated in the notion of “sexual rights”. It is precisely these notions that are at the heart of the debates concerning teenage pregnancy. The problem lies in the fact that the MMFDH neutralized teenage voices and experiences, not recognizing their legitimacy, by electing the family as the centre of strategies of preventing “premature sexual risk”. By not conferring on teenagers the status of right-bearing subjects, with a relative autonomy (since they remain dependent on their parents or other family members) to learn about sexuality as a form of social relation with the other, the government agents of the MMFDH suppress the dialogue and reflexivity inherent to the process of personal growth. These are tools that are essential to sex education (Schalet, 2011). An appeal to a reiterated Christian sexual ethics seems to preside over the government’s strategy, increasingly distancing it from the teenage public it intends to target. By emphasising family ties, in alliance with an anti-gender rhetoric, picking out infancy and education as the nucleus of this moral crusade, the federal government implements one of its main strategies for political governance.

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# Conflicts surrounding the “natural antidote against COVID-19”: Brazil sanitation governance in action

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## **Abstract**

As the COVID-19 pandemic sprawled across every continent, ‘hand-washing’ became the official guideline to prevent contagion. In this scenario, governmental and non-governmental actors mobilised to promote the provision of water supply and customer services to the largest number of people. With the imposed isolation, virtual events became the centre of the political debate, bringing to light strategies and challenges to guarantee basic needs, debated within the scope of the federal legislative and executive branches and civil society. The purpose of this article is to explore the discourses produced and the interventions proposed between April and May 2020. In the light of social studies of science and technology and discussions regarding the enactment and production of the state, mapped through the actions of key actors, this ethnography enables us to outline the conflicts of sanitation governance in Brazil.

**Key words:** Brazil, COVID-19, Sanitation, Ethnography, Institutions.

# Conflitos em torno do “antídoto natural contra COVID-19”: governança do saneamento no Brasil em ação

## Resumo

A pandemia de COVID-19 se alastrava por todos os continentes e “lavar as mãos” era a orientação oficial. Nesse cenário, atores governamentais e não governamentais se mobilizavam para promover a prestação do serviço de abastecimento de água e o atendimento do maior número de pessoas. Com o isolamento imposto, eventos virtuais se tornaram o centro do debate político, trazendo à tona estratégias e desafios para a garantia das necessidades básicas, debatidas no âmbito dos poderes legislativo e executivo nacional e da sociedade civil. O presente artigo tem como objetivo explorar os discursos acionados e as intervenções propostas entre abril e maio de 2020. À luz dos Estudos Sociais da Ciência e Tecnologia, das discussões a propósito da atuação e produção do Estado, mapeada por meio de ações de atores chaves, essa etnografia permite desenhar os conflitos da governança do saneamento no Brasil.

**Palavras-chave:** Brasil, COVID-19, Saneamento, Etnografia, Instituições.



# Conflicts surrounding the “natural antidote against COVID-19”: Brazil sanitation governance in action

Lara Ramos, Marisol Marini and Rosana Corazza

## Introduction

Emma Crewe (2021) argues that although social anthropologists have studied political institutions, politicians and other leaders, they have rarely ventured into the centres of power. In the case of Brazil, these centres of power are organised in the form of institutions of the executive, legislative and judicial branches, at the federal, state and municipal levels. There are several institutions that play a fundamental role in the conduct of democracy and in the realisation of human and constitutional rights. Shedding light on these centres of power through the particular filter of anthropology is fundamental, particularly in the current situation facing Brazil.

The country has been dealing with a serious political, economic and institutional crisis since 2014, period of the conflicting impeachment of former president Dilma Rousseff. Within the scope of the National Congress, power struggles became visibly more polarised, with impacts on the governance of basic services. The election of President Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 brought even greater instability to the political scene. The dismantling of public institutions led by the president’s far-right government intensified the impacts on democratic processes and the increasing social inequality. It was within this scenario that the country was traversed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some facts recorded in a period of 30 days after the first confirmed case in Brazil:

- On March 24, 2020, the non-governmental organisation *Habitat para a Humanidade Brasil* [Habitat for Humanity Brazil] and over 60 entities and networks active in the major themes of housing and public health in Brazil filed a letter with the *Ministério Público Federal* [Federal Public Prosecutor’s Office] reinforcing the need for states and municipalities to ensure the supply of water that focused on favelas, peripheries and vulnerable groups, ‘with the aim of adequately supporting this significant part of the Brazilian population’ (Habitat, 2020).
- On March 25, 2020, the *Defensoria Pública* [Public Defender’s Office] of the State of São Paulo recommended the adoption of measures by the Department of Water and Sewage of the town of Valinhos, with a view to ensuring the continuity of water supplies to families living in the ‘Marielle Vive’ Rural Camp, temporarily prohibiting any suspension of this ‘essential public service’ (DPESP, 2020; emphasis added).
- On March 27, 2020, federal representative Rosa Neide (PT/MT) drafted Bill no. 1142/2020 in the *Câmara dos Deputados* [Brazilian House of Representatives], which provided for ‘very urgent measures to support traditional peoples and communities’ due to the novel coronavirus’.

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<sup>1</sup> Traditional Peoples and Communities: culturally differentiated groups that recognise themselves as such, that have their own forms of social organisation, that occupy and use territories and natural resources as a condition for their cultural, social, religious, ancestral and economic reproduction, using knowledge, innovations and practices generated and transmitted by tradition (Brasil, 2007).

- On April 13, 2020, the *Ministério Público Federal* [Federal Public Prosecutor's Office], through the 6<sup>th</sup> Office of Coordination and Review – Indigenous Populations and Traditional Communities – published new guidelines on action for the *Ministério da Cidadania* [Ministry of Citizenship] ‘while the novel coronavirus pandemic lasts’, in order to guarantee access to basic health services and food security for vulnerable populations (MPF, 2020).
- Also in April, the *Ministério Público do Estado de São Paulo* and the *Ministério Público do Estado de Rio de Janeiro* [State Public Prosecutors' Offices] demanded measures from the state-owned sanitation companies to guarantee the supply of water to all favelas and subnormal agglomerations<sup>2</sup>. The *Ação Civil Pública com Pedido de Tutela de Urgência* [Public Civil Action with Request for Urgent Tutelage] (MPRJ, 2020) affirmed that guaranteeing the supply of potable water and the provision of adequate sanitation conditions ‘are essential factors for the safety and protection of the health of the population, especially during outbreaks of infectious diseases’.

Human rights recognised by the United Nations, such as the right to water and sanitation, and constitutional rights, specifically public health and a balanced environment, gained the spotlight as ‘hand-washing’ became an imperative. Given the challenges posed by the pandemic, the question emerged: how to overcome the historical and unequal deficit of water supply in the short term? And following this, it became fundamental to question: what paths had been proposed by public institutions to guarantee access to water for populations in vulnerable situations? What were the positions of strategic actors in basic sanitation governance vis-à-vis international and local demands? These are some of the questions that we address herein.

The commitment is analytical, descriptive, and imminently political, corroborating the understanding that ‘a healthy democracy needs researchers to take a close look at the claims, relationships and performances of politicians’ (Crewe, 2021: 21-22), in order to indicate tools for improving social control of public policies, as well as to assist in proposing ways to strengthen institutions. Venturing on the potential of the ethnographic method and approach, on the principle that combines the articulation between native theory and accumulated anthropological theory – or rather, more specifically, theories concerning the state and public policies – the purpose is to draw on ethnographic data produced from meetings articulated by governmental and non-governmental actors to analyse the state in action.

Our reflections are organised into five sections. In addition to this introduction, the article comprises Section 2 ‘Ethnographic method and virtual ethnography’, in which we detail the stages of identifying and analysing the virtual events, as well as characterising the mapped network of actors. Section 3 ‘Consensus?’, is dedicated to characterising the confluence of positions on the ‘urgency’ of meeting the demand for water supply. Section 4 ‘Fixes and conflicts’ provides a deeper analysis of the results of the virtual ethnographic study, with the identification of three types of necessary fixes in water supply infrastructure indicated by different interlocutors: material, socioeconomic and political-institutional. The positions of civil society representatives reveal the interconnection of these fixes. Finally, the importance of ethnographic studies to monitor the performance of competent government actors in ensuring basic needs, both during and after the pandemic, together with the social control of public policies, is reinforced.

<sup>2</sup> According to the definition of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE): subnormal agglomerations can fit within the following categories: squatting, irregular or clandestine allotment, and recently regularised squatted and irregular areas and clandestine subdivisions, while observing the criteria of urbanisation patterns and/or precarity of essential public services (Guimarães, 2015: 2).

## Section 2: Ethnographic method and virtual ethnography

We begin with discussions undertaken by Mariza Peirano (2000) concerning Brazilian ethnographic production and its specificities regarding contextualised otherness. Peirano makes it evident that Brazilian anthropology is historically accustomed to ‘reduced alterities’, that is, even when investigating the cultures of Indigenous nations, and ‘others’ considered to be radical alterities (from the perspective of European anthropology), the distance – geographical, or even linguistic, since some peoples knew or were able to communicate in Portuguese – is closer than those instituted in colonial enterprises.

We suggest that the relationship of alterity was traversed by the proximity and engagement of the first author with the field of investigation, given that she is an environmental engineer and proposes an interdisciplinary approach that is simultaneously investigative, analytical, and capable of generating interventions. As discussed by Nader (1972), the stimulating effect of indignation has resulted in research and university extension projects in the field of environmental engineering since 2013, a period in which the first author began to question the distance between classroom theory and the reality of rural areas: ‘What can explain the fact that a family, 20 km [12.4 mi] from the university that is a national reference in the research and teaching of hydraulics and sanitation [University of São Paulo], lives without a bathroom and with an intermittent supply of water?’ (Fantin et al., 2021: 57).

After seven years of work on the subject, her indignation at the invisibility of Brazil’s social and territorial diversity in infrastructure projects and public sanitation policies, as well as in teaching and research actions by large universities, was mitigated by the rapid mobilisation of the sanitation sector when faced with the COVID-19 pandemic. Actions being outlined for populations and areas that were excluded from access to water supply services emerged as ‘urgent’ problems – albeit old and structural. The expectation that the moment Brazilians were facing could be one ‘*freio de arrumação*’<sup>3</sup> – like a brake on a moving bus that puts everyone and everything in its place – ended up remodelling indignation to a feeling of distrustful hope in the investigation.

We undertook the empirical case explored here as an example of anthropology that is conducted ‘close to home (at home)’, as suggested by Peirano, taking this proximity to home as familiarity with the technical discussions and engagement with the networks that are focused on the investigation. And it is precisely because of this proximity, and based on the assumption that the observer is an integral part of the process of knowledge and discovery, that the methodological device of otherness is activated in the sense of finding the familiar strange, a practice fundamental to doing anthropology.

In this sense, we corroborate Peirano’s suggestion (2000) that, in anthropology, there are no social facts, but rather ‘ethnographic facts’, emphasising that there is always a process of selection in that observed and in the report’s interpretations. Thus, unfamiliarity, that is, part of the methodological device committed to producing a distancing in relation to the supposedly familiar, becomes not only the way in which the confrontation between different theories transpires, but also the means of self-reflection.

The ethnographic enterprise developed here is located in the field of social studies of science and technology<sup>4</sup>, to the extent that it examines the institutions we understand to be central to the shaping and maintenance of modernity. We qualify such studies as those committed to revealing unsuspected connections between power and knowledge (including here forms of policies and interventions based on scientific expertise), producing new perspectives on science, politics and society. As Isabelle Stengers (2002: 11) suggests, this is an approach that confronts the audacity of studying science and its interventions in the manner of a social project ‘neither more detached from the concerns of the world, nor more universal or rational than any other’.

3 An expression used by Nei Lopes in an opinion piece published in Piauí magazine. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/opiniaio/2022/06/freio-de-arrumacao.shtml> and <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/materia/na-companhia-dos-orixas/>

4 For a history of the consolidation of the field of social studies of science and technology, we suggest Sismondo (2010), Spiegel-Rosing (1997), Winner (1993) and Zilsel (1942).

In a scenario in which scientists claim to speak for nature and democratic governments speak for the needs of the people, Sheila Jasanoff suggests that a foundational question concerning representation emerges: how are the few authorised to speak for the many?

We also dialogue with works on the state in its practical dimension. In the making of the state, considering dynamic and procedural processes as the object of description and analysis, operating ethnographically in order to advance in the face of perspectives that are limited to the prescriptions inscribed in the law, 'we want to value the dimensions of process, flow, and performance, not only those apprehensible through the analysis of great rituals and events, but also their daily updating' (Lima, 2012: 561). Therefore, as argued by Teixeira et al. (2019: 11), this concerns researching the 'making of a state', by considering the discourses of state agents as native, attentive not to the transcendence of their statements, but to the practice and particular construction, providing this abstraction with specific, local, historical bodies and meanings.

Responding to the demand for some urgency in a reinvention of anthropology and its commitment to examine power (Nader, 1972), the commitment here is to return to those 'at the top', through a democratic commitment to evaluate and enable transformations in the quality of life of citizens affected by the policies and agents that shape and control institutional structures<sup>5</sup>. According to Nader, it is pertinent that a reinvented anthropology study powerful institutions and bureaucratic organisations, given that they affect the lives of the people that anthropologists have traditionally studied around the world.

In the movement to pry 'behind the facelessness of a bureaucratic society' (Nader, 1972), we highlight that the ethnography that underlies the reflections presented here was conducted virtually, which implies specificities in the way our interactions were developed. Our analysis was established through the narrow screen of our computers, in the safety of our private environments in times of pandemic<sup>6</sup>.

Events on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Zoom and Eventials enabled different actors to meet with the aim of raising topics related to fulfilling basic needs. This article presents the results of the ethnography conducted in April and May 2020. Eight online events were selected as the focus of this study, which were determined by the criteria of the relevance of the actors present and that provided analyses of the centres of power: representatives of regulatory agencies, public companies supplying water services, the national legislative and executive branches, together with representatives of social movements and associations.

As a result of the analyses, institutional-legal conflicts and epistemological conflicts were discussed in the spheres of decision-making, regarding the manner of solving 'sanitation' problems. Despite the consensus that water supply is fundamental, the causes for the absence of this public service, and the means to ensure its full guarantee, were shown to diverge among the groups of actors analysed.

## Virtual ethnography

(...) ethnography is not just data collection and interpretation, it involves writing about people evocatively and with imagination. The people are the focus because anthropology tends to be empirical, starting with guesses about what is going on, proceeding to people's everyday experiences, meaning-making and relationships, and building up more certain theory from the bottom upwards. (Crewe, 2021: 10-11)

<sup>5</sup> For Nader (1972: 292): 'If anthropology were reinvented to study up, we would sooner or later need to study down as well. We are not dealing with an either/or proposition; we need simply to realize when it is useful or crucial in terms of the problem to extend the domain of study up, down, or sideways.'

<sup>6</sup> It is important to highlight that this article is the result of research for a Master's degree pursued in the Post-graduate Programme in Scientific and Technological Policy at the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP). The research, initiated in 2019, was directly impacted by the context of COVID-19, and underwent reformulations of the objectives and methodologies used. The complete document of this dissertation can be accessed at the institutional repository of UNICAMP, here: <http://repositorio.unicamp.br/Acervo/Detalhe/1233315>

Segata and Rifiotis (2016: 9-10) argue that studies in the ‘field of cyberculture’ have gained prominence in Brazil over the last 20 years. E-mails, chats, blogs, bank transactions, electronic games, applications and social networks are some of the examples raised by the authors who were and continue to be mobilised by disciplines that include sociology, communication, philosophy, anthropology and the arts: ‘Not for less, this field has been dynamic, challenging, controversial and has mobilised intense debates in events and publications. The authors argue in defence of ethnography as the ‘master key’ of research in this field, with ‘Internet Ethnography’, ‘Virtual Ethnography’, ‘Online Ethnography’ and/or ‘Netnography’ already propounded as methods in different research works (Beaulieu, 2004; Hine, 2011; Martinhago, 2018).

Analysing the debates surrounding attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in a community on the social network Facebook, Fernanda Martinhago (2018, p. 3331) points out that ‘the virtual world has provided a transformation in the research context, such that ethnographers can free themselves from “place” through the Internet’. Hine (2011, p. 3) emphasises this transformation and argues that the Internet ‘offers rich data for almost any social researcher’, since many aspects of everyday life are reflected ‘somewhere online’. The author argues that using data ‘found’ on the Internet enables the exploration of ‘people’s understanding of a topic or cultural phenomenon’.

For this empirical study, a ‘specific place’<sup>7</sup> was not previously selected. Given that the events took place in different places and mobilised different actors, we opted to follow the events instead of remaining on one platform. Between April 7 and May 19 – a period in which the increase in COVID-19 cases was observed in every state in the country, and while the debate for approval of the *Novo Marco Legal do Saneamento*<sup>8</sup> [New Legal Sanitation Framework] was gaining clearer contours in the Brazilian Senate – we were mapping events publicised in networks of actors active in the major themes of sanitation and public health: the WhatsApp groups ‘Grupo de Trabalho Água e Saneamento’ [Water and Sanitation Working Group], created by the Environmentalist Parliamentary Caucus of the Legislative Assembly of the State of São Paulo; and ‘Grupo OTSS Redes’ [OTSS Networks Group], created by the *Observatório de Territórios Sustentáveis e Saudáveis da Bocaina* [Bocaina Healthy and Sustainable Territories Bureau], an initiative of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation and the *Fórum de Comunidades Tradicionais de Angra-Paraty-Ubatuba* [Forum of Traditional Communities of Ubatuba, Paraty and Angra dos Reis] (OTSS - FIOCRUZ). Several Facebook pages: *Associação Brasileira de Saúde Coletiva* (ABRASCO) [Brazilian Association of Collective Health], and the *Conselho Pastoral dos Pescadores* (CPP) [Fishermen’s Pastoral Council]. And the following newsletters: Connected Smart Cities, the *Grupo de Economia da Infraestrutura e Soluções Ambientais da Fundação Getúlio Vargas* [FGV Group on Infrastructure Economics and Environmental Solutions], and the *Associação Brasileira de Engenharia Sanitária e Ambiental* (ABES) [Brazilian Association of Sanitary and Environmental Engineering].

During this period, 16 announcements of virtual events were identified, including the following: *Saneamento Básico e a Pandemia* [Basic Sanitation and the Pandemic]; *Coronavírus e o Setor de Saneamento* [Coronavirus and the Sanitation Sector]; *Soluções em Saneamento para atendimento a Populações Vulneráveis em período de quarentena* [Sanitation Solutions to attend Vulnerable Populations under quarantine]; and *Perspectivas de especialistas da área de recursos hídricos sobre os impactos da Covid-19* [Perspectives from specialists in the field of water resources

7 Martinhago (2018) researched a specific Facebook community and Belloti et al (2010) focused on the game “World of Warcraft”.

8 Law 11,445/2007, which until 2018 was presented as the great structuring pillar of the sanitation sector, entered the political agenda more intensely after two provisional measures (MP) signed by then interim president Michel Temer: MP no. 844 of July 2018 and MP no. 868 of December 2018. Despite having expired, the effects of these provisional measures materialised in Bill no. 4162, approved by the *Câmara dos Deputados* (Brazil’s lower house) in December 2019. The debate surrounding the ‘*Novo Marco Legal do Saneamento*’ [New Sanitation Legal Framework], the role of the National Water Agency, and the greater participation of the private sector and ownership of the service, were some elements present in the public debate months before the covid-19 emergency.

on the impacts of COVID-19]. Amidst a veritable ‘explosion’ of announcements, with an average of three per week, criteria were created to elect the events in which participation could occur in ‘real time’ – with the aim of interacting in the chats and possibly presenting questions to the speakers – and those saved to watch later. For both formats, the following criteria were applied: open events (available on public platforms, without admission fees or education specifications for registration) and with the presence of representatives of governmental and non-governmental actors strategic for the debate. Among these events, eight were selected for subsequent presentation of the results and discussion.

Table 1 presents the events selected, including the respective dates, platforms, forms of access, and views, together with who began the initiative and who the participating actors were. Over a period of 30 days (April 16 to May 19), we navigated through three different platforms: YouTube, Zoom and Eventials<sup>9</sup>. Despite these different platforms, the dynamics of the events followed very similar protocols, with around 50 to 60 minutes of debate between the invited actors, succeeded by a period reserved for questions from the participants. All platforms enabled interaction through chat, where in addition to asking questions directed at the speakers, participants talked to each other. This interactive space was only included in the analysis of the events monitored in ‘real time’, given that the availability of the recording did not include a ‘replay of the chat’. The recording, on the other hand, only enabled analysis of the questions that were answered by the guest actors via the organisation’s mediation.

Regarding the network of actors mapped, we categorised them into governmental and non-governmental actors. Governmental actors from the federal legislative branch stand out, in particular federal representatives: Geninho Juliani (DEM/SP), Joenia Wapichana (REDE/RR), Bira do Pindaré (PSB/MA) and Rodrigo Agostinho (PSB/SP). The performance of male and female representatives, based on their individual trajectory and the analysis of events, enabled us to determine the mobilisation of two central agendas: approval of the New Legal Sanitation Framework within the scope of the lower house, and the defence of traditional peoples and communities in the face of COVID-19.

On one side stands Geninho Juliano (DEM/SP), rapporteur for the new regulatory sanitation framework, who credits state-owned companies with most of the basic sanitation problems in Brazil and defends opening up the market. His arguments revolve around greater legal certainty for private companies to participate in providing the service, and he is seen as a ‘Hercules’ by his allies in academia and the private sector – an expression used throughout Event 1. On the other, Joenia Wapichana (REDE/RR), the first Indigenous woman elected as a federal representative, broadens the debate by turning to structural causes for the non-guarantee of basic needs, especially in the case of Indigenous peoples. The representative, together with Bira do Pindaré (PSB/MA) and Rodrigo Agostinho (PSB/SP), participated in Event 7 with allies from civil society and academia. Within the scope of the executive branch, the participation of the special secretary for *Programas de Parcerias de Investimentos do Ministério da Economia* [Investment Partnership Programmes of the Ministry of the Economy] (Event 3), and representatives of regulatory agencies and public sanitation companies (Events 2, 4 and 6) is observed.

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<sup>9</sup> YouTube: a video sharing platform, where the events were broadcast live and remained saved, with the full recording available. A widespread platform in Brazil, which has no access restrictions and does not require user login and registration. Zoom: a videoconferencing software programme, where participants and guests must request permission to access the room. Later, the recordings of the meetings were made available on YouTube. Eventials: a Brazilian video transmission platform, where a simplified user registration is requested for release at the event. The events were broadcast live and remained saved for a period on the same platform, with free access.

The intense participation of non-governmental actors also attract attention. Among actors representing the sanitation sector, associations like the Brazilian Association of Sanitary and Environmental Engineering (ABES), the *Associação Brasileira de Agências de Regulação* (ABAR) [Brazilian Association of Regulatory Agencies], *Associação Brasileira das Concessionárias Privadas de Serviços Públicos de Água e Esgoto* (ABCON) [Private Concessionaires of Public Water and Sewage Services] and the *Associação Brasileira das Empresas Estaduais de Saneamento* (AESBE) [Brazilian Association of State Sanitation Companies] organised and participated in several events during this period.

Some of these organisations and civil associations in the sanitation sector, like the ABES, AESBE and ABCON, should be briefly characterised. The ABES has 55 years of experience and its associative body unites around 10,000 professionals from the sector, particularly sanitation, environmental and civil engineers. The AESBE has 37 years of experience and represents the basic sanitation companies of each state. ABCON, in turn, has 25 years of experience and unites private companies that provide these services, representing the private sector together with public authorities and organised civil society.

Within the scope of social movements active in Indigenous and *Quilombola* territories, the *Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil* (APIB) [Articulation of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil] and the *Coordenação Nacional de Articulação das Comunidades Negras Rurais Quilombolas* (CONAQ) [National Coordination for the Articulation of Black Rural Quilombola Communities] should be highlighted. The APIB was created by the Indigenous movement in 2005, bringing together regional Indigenous organisations from across the country. The Indigenous movement articulated by APIB acts on several fronts, including Indigenous legislation, Indigenous health, Indigenous education, the management of territories and sustainability, and social participation. CONAQ, in turn, was created in 1995 with the aim of mobilising *Quilombola* communities from various states in the struggle to guarantee the collective use of their territories.

**Table 1.** Virtual events selected for analysis and discussion (April and May 2020)

Event ID	Date	Name of Event and Organisation	Platform, Access, Link e Views <sup>10</sup>	Actors <sup>11</sup>
1	April 16, 2020	<i>COVID-19: Saneamento em Foco – Prevenção e Desenvolvimento</i> [COVID-19: Sanitation in Focus – Prevention and Development] <i>Fundação Getúlio Vargas</i> (FGV) [Getúlio Vargas Foundation] and the <i>Instituto Brasileiro de Estudos Jurídicos da Infraestrutura</i> (IBEJI) [Brazilian Institute of Legal Infrastructure Studies]	YouTube: Live (open), available at: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XGY-ursBTY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XGY-ursBTY</a> Views: 691	Governmental: Federal Representative Geninho Juliani (DEM, SP) and rapporteur of the New Sanitation Regulatory Framework in the lower house. Non-Governmental: Daniela Mattos Sandoval, Vice-President of Corporate Affairs and Regulation at BKR Ambiental; Rosane Coelho and Charles Schramm, Executive Managers at FGV Projetos; Augusto Nevez Dal Pozzo, President of IBEJI; João Negri Neto, Administrative and Financial Director at IBEJI; Percy Soares, Executive Director of the Brazilian Association of Private Concessionaires of Public Water and Sewage Services.
2	April 17, 2020	<i>Perspectivas de especialistas da área de recursos hídricos sobre os impactos do COVID-19 no Estado de São Paulo</i> [perspectives of specialists in the area of water resources on the impacts of COVID-19 in the State of São Paulo] (United Nations Global Compact Network)	Zoom: (open inscription), available at: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMMyV3NarzhI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMMyV3NarzhI</a> Views: 899	Governmental: Benedito Braga, President of SABESP (Basic Sanitation Company of the State of São Paulo) Non-governmental – Civil associations: Giuliana Moreira, United Nations Global Compact Network Brazil; Telma Rocha - Director of the Avina Foundation; Francisco Lahóz, Executive Secretary at the Intermunicipal Consortium of the Piracicaba, Capivari and Jundiaí River Basins (Consortium PCJ).
3	April 20, 2020	<i>Perspectivas para o saneamento básico no Brasil: por que um Novo Marco Regulatório?</i> [Perspectives for basic sanitation in Brazil: Why is a new regulatory framework necessary?] (Connected Smart Cities)	Zoom: (open inscription), available at: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMMyV3NarzhI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMMyV3NarzhI</a> Views: 734 *Watched the recording	Governmental: Martha Seillier, Special Secretary for the Investment Partnerships Programme (PPI) at the Ministry of the Economy. Non-governmental: Mauricio Portugal Ribeiro, Partner at Portugal Ribeiro Advogados (Law Firm); Luiz Felipe Graziano, Partner at Giamundo Neto Advogados (Law Firm); Sebastián Butto, Partner at Siglasul (Regulatory Consultants).
4	April 30, 2020	<i>Soluções em Saneamento para atendimento a populações vulneráveis em período de quarentena</i> [Solutions in Sanitation to care for vulnerable populations under quarantine] ( <i>Associação Brasileira de Engenharia Ambiental e Sanitária</i> [Brazilian Association of Environmental and Sanitary Engineering])	Eventials: (open inscription), available at: <a href="http://abes-dn.org.br/?p=33618">http://abes-dn.org.br/?p=33618</a> Views: 3842 *Watched the recording	Governmental: Paulo Massato, Metropolitan Director of SABESP) Non-governmental: Samanta Tavares de Souza, ABES Thematic Chamber Coordinator for Service Provision and Customer Relations; Juliana Almeida Dutra, Projects Director at Deep Consulting.

<sup>10</sup> Views up to August 19, 2021. It was not possible to count the number live participants.

<sup>11</sup> A description of each of the actors presented at the event.



Event ID	Date	Name of Event and Organisation	Platform, Access, Link e Views <sup>10</sup>	Actors <sup>11</sup>
5	May 4, 2020	<i>Reequilíbrio Econômico - Financeiro nos contratos de concessão de Saneamento Básico</i> [Economic-financial rebalancing in basic sanitation concession contracts] (Associação Brasileira de Engenharia Ambiental e Sanitária [Brazilian Association of Environmental and Sanitary Engineering])	Eventuals: (open inscription), available at: <a href="http://abes-dn.org.br/?p=33618">http://abes-dn.org.br/?p=33618</a> Views: 903	Non-governmental: Rodrigo Hosken, Technical-Legal Coordinator of ABES Corporate Law and Governance Thematic Chamber; Luciana Figueras, CEO at <i>Tomorrow Gestão</i> [Tomorrow Management]; Rogel Martins Barbosa, Founding Partner of Martins Barbosa Advogados (Law Firm).
6	May 13, 2020	<i>Coronavírus e o Setor de Saneamento: efeitos financeiros e a visão do regulador</i> [Coronavirus and the Sanitation Sector: financial effects and the regulator's view] (Associação Brasileira de Agências de Regulação (ABAR) [Brazilian Association of Regulatory Agencies])	Zoom: (open inscription), available at: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WKGag6Yb_8">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WKGag6Yb_8</a> Views: 121	Governmental: Mario Augusto Parente, Economic-Tariff Coordinator at the Regulatory Agency of the State of Ceará. Non-governmental: Cássio Leandro Cossenno, coordinator of the Tariffs and Accounting Technical Group of the ABAR Basic Sanitation, Water Resources and Health Technical Council.
7	May 14, 2020	<i>Encontro Virtual das Frentes: Indígena, Quilombola, Ambientalista e Fórum da Amazônia - Painel 3: Estratégias dos povos no enfrentamento ao COVID-19</i> [Virtual Meeting of the Indigenous, Quilombola, Environmentalist and Amazon Forum Caucuses - Panel 3: Strategies of peoples in combating COVID-19] (Câmara dos Deputados [Brazilian House of Representatives])	Zoom: open access. Made available later on Facebook ( <a href="https://bit.ly/2NK1n56">https://bit.ly/2NK1n56</a> ) Views not quantified	Governmental: Joenia Wapichana, Federal Representative; Bira do Pindaré, Federal Representative; Rodrigo Agostinho, Federal Representative. Non-governmental: Sonia Guajajara, Coordinator of the Coordination of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil; Virgílio Viana, Sustainable Amazonas Foundation representative; Marta Azevedo, Researcher at NEPO/UNICAMP (Centre for Population Studies at Campinas State University); Caetano Scannavino, Director of the NGO <i>Saúde e Alegria</i> [Health & Happiness]; Paulo Roberto Nunes Ferreira, UNICEF representative; Biko Rodrigues, Coordinator of the National Coordination of the Articulation of Black Quilombola Communities; José Ivanildo Gama, Director of the National Council of Extractivist Populations.
8	May 19, 2020	<i>COVID-19 e Povos do Mar</i> [COVID-19 and Peoples of the Sea] (Instituto Oceanográfico [Oceanographic Institute] of the University of São Paulo (IOUSP))	Zoom: open access. Made available later on YouTube ( <a href="https://bit.ly/38fLYY">https://bit.ly/38fLYY</a> ) Views: 54	Non-governmental: Santiago Bernardes, articulator of the Forum of Traditional Communities of Ubatuba, Paraty and Angra dos Reis; Bianca Gabani, IOUSP; Nuala Costa, Leader of the feminist movement ' <i>Todas para o Mar</i> ' [Women for the Sea]; Cristiano Ramalho, professor in Fishing Sociology at the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE).

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the research, originally presented in Ramos (2021: 67 & 68).

Throughout the analysis, two large debate blocs emerged. Seeing the scenario of a health crisis and an economic crisis, actors in the sanitation sector (service providers and regulators) emphasised the negative impacts of COVID-19 both in terms of regulation and provision. It is important to underline that the actors in the sector dialogued with their allies in academia and the legislature, as is evident in the configuration of the actors invited to Events 1 to 6.

As observed at the event organised by the Brazilian Association of Regulatory Agencies (ABAR), Mario Augusto Parente argued that the pandemic is in itself a ‘tragedy’ for the sector, where ‘the users have no money and suppliers are asking for tariff readjustments’ (Economic-Tariff Coordinator of the Regulatory Agency of Public Services of Ceará, Event 6). Linking the health crisis with the economic crisis, the actor signalled the measures being adopted in the case of households already connected to the supply networks. In particular, to guarantee access to water for low-income users – in the category of social residential/social tariff usage – the exemption of billing, guaranteeing supply in cases of non-payment, and the suspension of fines and interests for late payments were the measures highlighted by the actor. According to him, the immediate consequences of these actions ‘are cutting into the cash flow of these companies.

Along similar lines, Luciana Figueiras, a speaker at the event organised by the Brazilian Association of Environmental and Sanitary Engineering, pointed out that the economic effects of the pandemic can be observed in the current concession contracts: ‘The public and private concession contracts are suffering an imbalance given the scenario of public calamity’ (CEO at *Tomorrow Gestão* [Tomorrow Management], Event 5). On different platforms, however, the narratives of the actors of Events 5 and 6 were aligning. Luciana Figueiras, Rogel Martins Barbosa, Rodrigo Hosken, Cássio Leandro and Mario Augusto elucidated the connection between the economic crisis and the health crisis and justified joint efforts to ‘minimise the economic losses experienced by this sector’ (Mario Augusto, Event 5).

In terms of provision, a convergence of narratives was also observed. The Vice-President of BRK Ambiental – the largest private company in Brazil –, the Executive Director of the Brazilian Association of Private Concessionaires of Public Water and Sewage Services (ABCON), and the President and Metropolitan Director of the *Companhia Estadual de Saneamento Básico do Estado de São Paulo* (SABESP) [Basic Sanitation Company of the State of São Paulo] – considered one of the largest sanitation companies in the world in terms of population served – all touched on similar points, emphasising the economic impacts, the challenges of maintaining continued provision and regulatory challenges.

If I could choose one [challenge] I would say that it is a more stable regulation, a better understanding of the rules, the safety of the investor in knowing the rules and knowing what they are getting into (...) I will give an example here of the COVID situation (...) We had around 180 acts, decrees, rules, that touched on the operation in various ways (...) this excessive decentralisation allows for different acts (...) there are multiple people thinking in different ways each with their respective interests, and from the investor’s point of view, you are left without the necessary legal certainty of knowing what the rules are beforehand and being able to invest. (Daniela Mattos, Vice-President of Corporate Affairs and Regulation at BKR Ambiental, Event 1)

As Crewe (2021: 14 – 15) suggests, if we only concentrate on individuals who make policy and do not look at the processes – the relationships and communication between them – we may attain an impoverished analysis.

Thus, it is essential to underline the connections between the narratives presented by actors representing the private sector (BRK and ABCON) and the argument of Martha Seillier, Special Secretary of the Investment Partnerships Programme of the Ministry of the Economy<sup>12</sup>, in an event held four days later:

I asked to bring up this agenda for core reforms, which was what I had worked on, and I said ‘Minister, it’s so complex and the legal framework for this sector, which dates back to 2007, fell far short of addressing these federative complexities and the reality that we live today, which is a wholly different fiscal reality from 2007, and which I think that if we don’t consider real reform for basic sanitation, reviewing its legal framework, we won’t move forward’. Because to attract private investment to this sector, you need to have legal certainty, you need to have regulatory stability, you need to have a series of things that this sector doesn’t have, and it’s no wonder that there is only a 6% share of private investment. (Martha Seillier, Event 3)

Martha Seillier was the only representative of the federal executive branch mapped in the events analysed. She is an economist who served in the Civil House during the Michel Temer administration, and became responsible for coordinating the Federal Privatisation Programme under the influence of then-president Jair Bolsonaro himself<sup>13</sup>.

From April 16 to May 13, therefore, the relationships of the actors of Events 1 to 6 – shown in Table 1 above – were becoming visible, together with their intentions. The economic impacts and regulatory challenges emphasised by service operators and regulators were the same aspects mobilised by the federal government’s representative. These arguments are the result of a prior mobilisation, marked by the approval of the new legal framework for basic sanitation in the lower house in December 2019<sup>14</sup>. In June 2020, at the height of the first wave of COVID-19 and about two months after the discourses described above, the new framework – Bill 4,162/2019 – was approved in the upper house<sup>15</sup>. On July 15 the same year, the president signed the bill into law<sup>16</sup>.

As a complement to Table 1, Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between these individuals and institutions: the relationships between the private sector (consultancies, law firms and private sanitation companies), civil associations and the federal executive and legislative branches within the scope of Events 1 and 3; between social movements, universities and the federal legislative branch within the scope of Event 7; between the private sector and civil associations within the scope of Event 5; and between civil associations, universities and social movements within the scope of Event 8.

Figure 1 also illustrates the intense participation of non-governmental actors. In this context, it is essential to emphasise that many participatory spaces have been closed and that the proliferation of virtual forums, often independent of the relevant institutions for the governance of public services, shows the vitality of civil society and a capacity for self-organisation. A sign that citizenship resists, that social movements are alive.

12 The Minister of Economy at that time was Paulo Guedes, one of the founders of the private bank BTG. He was part of the economic team of the Pinochet government, in Chile, in the early 1970s, and has an explicitly ultraliberal privatizing agenda. Paulo Guedes owns a millionaire account in the tax haven of the Cayman Islands. The scandal, revealed by the journalistic investigation that raised supporting documents pointing to tax evasion and suspicions of other crimes - the Pandora Papers -, also pointed out other names on the ultraliberal agenda raised by the first echelon of the Bolsonaro government, including the president of the Central Bank, Roberto Campos Neto. See: <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/paulo-guedes-tem-offshore-milionaria-em-paraiso-fiscal/>

13 In February of this year, 2023, Martha Seillier - who was nominated by Paulo Guedes and Bolsonaro for a board of directors at the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), in Washington, at the end of 2022 - gave birth to the former president’s granddaughter.

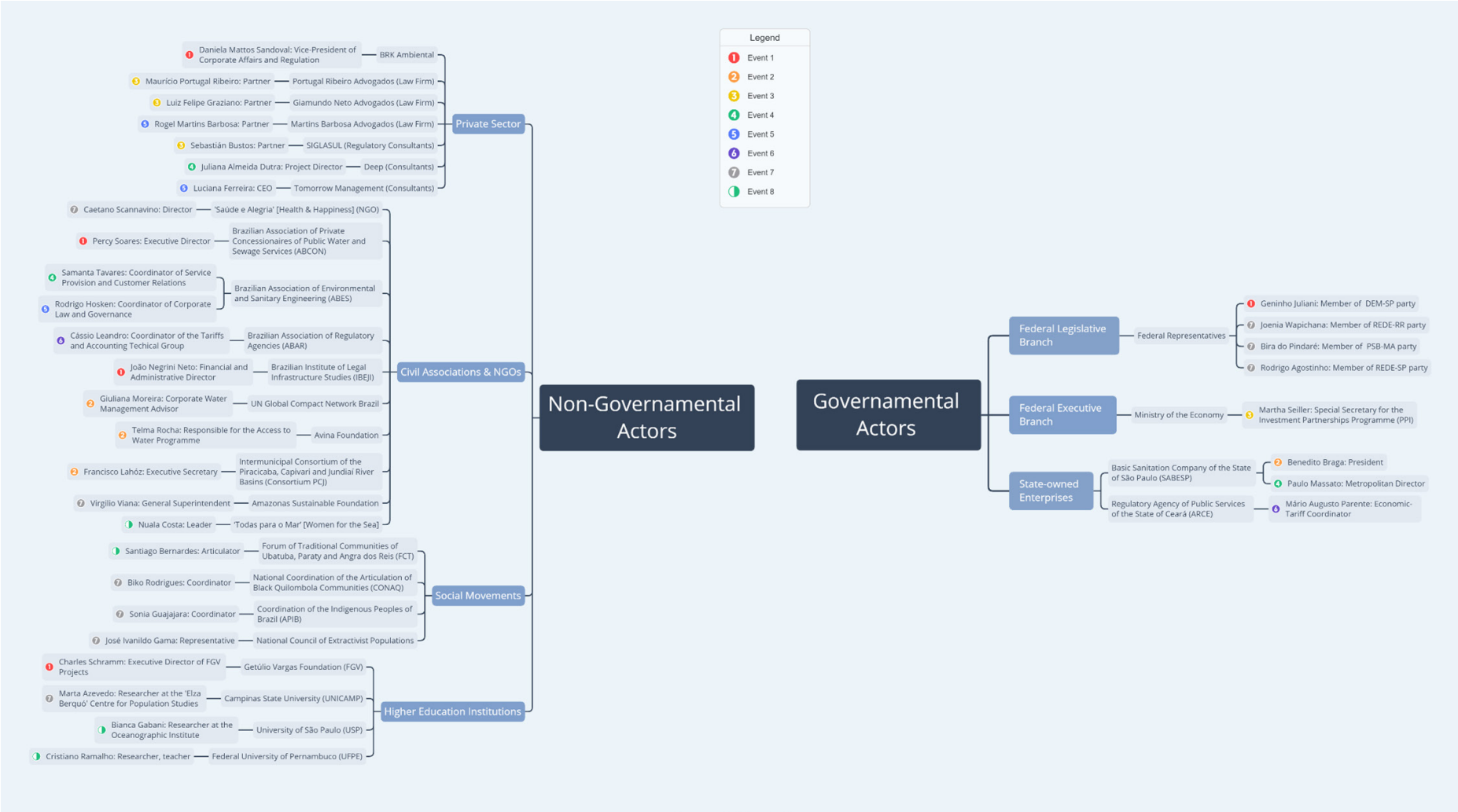
14 News regarding the approval of the new framework in the *Câmara dos Deputados* (lower house): <https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/627851-camara-aprova-novo-marco-legal-do-saneamento-basico/>

15 News regarding the approval of the new framework in the Brazilian Senate: <https://www12.senado.leg.br/noticias/materias/2020/06/24/senado-aprova-novo-marco-legal-do-saneamento-basico>

16 News on the signing of the new sanitation law: <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/07/15/bolsonaro-sanciona-novo-marco-legal-do-saneamento-basico.ghtml>

Closely analysing this resistance is also fundamental to democracy. Even though the centres of power do not mirror Brazilian diversity in political positions, social movements and associations representing civil society traverse public institutions with diverse mobilisations and articulations, as emphasised in the speech of a CONAQ leader: ‘We have been working together with the *Quilombola* Parliamentary Caucus, with Congress (...) to try to present our demands, also in partnership with Indigenous peoples, with the Indigenous Parliamentary Caucus’ (Biko Rodrigues, Event 7).

Figure 1. Map of the actors identified in the events analysed



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on the research, originally presented in Ramos (2021: 67 & 68).

### Section 3: Consensus?

Far from the scientific controversies associated with possible treatments for the disease, like those observed for chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, which mobilised world leaders and the President of the Republic, no disputes were identified concerning the use of water as a preventive measure. The statements in agreement with this measure were dominant in the narratives analysed, and expressive in the opening of the events:

Good afternoon, everyone, (...) Sanitation is on the agenda of the day, though not for the first time, it is more important right now. In fact, it is frightening to say that 3 billion people in the world do not have soap and water (...) this means that 40% of the entire world population does not have water (...) And today (...) among many uncertainties, there is no doubt that washing your hands is fundamental. (Opening speech by Charles Schramm, executive manager of FGV Projetos, Event 1)

This was an event that paid attention to local difficulties marked by the pandemic; not merely generic concerns regarding the calamity of the lack of water in a broad sense, but also the social problems that preceded and likely survived the health crisis. However, we see that world data and the chronic structural situation are used in this speech to assert the seriousness of the problem. Augusto Dal Pozzo, president of the *Instituto Brasileiro de Estudos Jurídicos da Infraestrutura* (IBEJI) [Brazilian Institute of Legal Infrastructure Studies], reiterated Schramm's statement at the same event:

What's funnier is that despite this many people who have no water, this ends up being the very *natural antidote against COVID*, right? Because the simple act of washing your hands with soap and water is exactly the initial antidote that can fight this very serious problem that we're living here with COVID-19. (Augusto Dal Pozzo, Event 1; emphasis added)

If there is an urgent demand, the discourse of the two interlocutors enables us to consider that because these problems occurred and were even worse prior to the pandemic, the solution to an apparently simple problem, such as washing your hands, is a challenge of great magnitude, given that a representative percentage of the population does not have access to these services. Giuliana Moreira, Event 2 mediator, also began her speech in this regard: 'We know that one of the fundamental preventive measures for COVID-19 is hand hygiene, which, of course, can only be achieved through access to clean water' (Global Compact Network Brazil Advisor, Event 2).

Initiating the analysis of these discourses by mobilising authors from the field of social studies of science and technology is justified by the possibility of disputing concepts like 'infrastructure' and 'technology', often crystallised as neutral concepts in the fields of engineering and economics. The debate on infrastructure in the works of Howe et al. (2016) and Star (1999), the discussion on technological determinism by Pfaffenberger (1988) and De Laet and Mol (2000), together with Haraway's (1988) defence of localised knowledge, allow us to weave such analysis from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Howe et al. (2016) begins the reflection on infrastructure, pointing out that 'Infrastructure is not inert, but rather infused with *social meanings* (...) [it] epitomizes the conjunction of material forms, expertise, social priorities, cultural expectations, aesthetics and economic investments' (2016: 548-549; emphasis added). Apparently, the representatives of the sanitation sector exhaustively focus on the material dimension of the narrated 'infrastructural' problem, regardless of its social meanings – marked by privileged or exclusionary social criteria regarding access to water supply.

The evidence is presented in the argument of Martha Seillier, Special Secretary of the Investment Partnerships Programme of the Ministry of the Economy. The secretary narrates that she received an invitation from the *Casa Civil* [Executive Office of the President (US) / Prime Minister's Office (UK)] to help coordinate major reforms – fiscal, social security, labour and taxation – and later was included in the sanitation working group. The solution they advocated is directly linked to attracting private investment:

Until one day, the minister met with the chief secretaries in this area and said that the president was extremely bothered by the basic sanitation numbers (...) always returning the agenda to how shameful the basic sanitation numbers were (...) medieval numbers on basic sanitation, right? (...) and the traditional answer has always been ‘ah, this is the competence of the municipalities, the states have their own state companies, the [federal government] basically provides funding’ (...) it was a tragic story, which may get worse, this was the diagnosis (...) so the minister at the time asked us to try to assess how the federal government could alter this reality (...) basically considering how to attract private investment into the basic sanitation sector. (Martha Seillier, Event 3)

From this perspective, the pandemic impacts only one aspect of the infrastructure and part of the sector’s governance, accelerating reforms within the scope of provision and regulation. Representatives of actors from public and private companies, regulatory agencies, civil associations in the sector and the federal legislative branch all pointed to regulatory measures, tariff adjustments and increased private investments in the sector, as well as to exceptional measures of tariff gratuity and the suspension of cuts in water supply ‘while the pandemic lasts’ (Events 1 to 6) – focusing on the material dimension of water supply infrastructure. From another perspective, representatives of social movements, non-governmental organisations and public universities raised other elements, such as territorial dynamics, conflicts in rural areas, food insecurity, the historical invisibility of peoples and traditional communities, and the omissions of the state – signalling the *social and political-institutional dimensions of infrastructure*.

#### **Section 4: Fixes and conflicts**

In Pfaffenberger’s (1988) approach, the solutions proposed in the material dimension can be read as ‘technical fixes’. These fixes, implemented in a short period of time by engineers, lawyers and economists, promised the delivery of ‘infrastructure’ in a pandemic scenario. However, this interpretation through ‘mundane mechanisms’ (Howe et al., 2016) produces technical fixes that are exclusionary and temporary. The misgivings of the participants in the chats following the debate between the speakers reinforces this argument: ‘how are the strategies in terms of land regularisation in these areas going, so that these measures are permanent, and not just in times of coronavirus?’ (Question raised in the chat, Event 2), and ‘What are SABESP’s initiatives to make drinking water available for homeless people? For example, in Cracolândia’ (Question raised in the chat, Event 2).

Presented as ‘universal’ fixes (Law, 2011), they only fit in realities that are more accustomed to water supply networks, such as densely populated regions. Thus, only regularised households – in terms of registration and documentation, and in terms of land ownership – and those already included in these networks can benefit from such measures. When asked about how companies and regulatory agencies are mapping groups that are in a vulnerable situation, Mario Augusto replied that ‘in practice... in practice, we are assuming information from records that already existed<sup>17</sup>. We had no previous quantification or validation work’ (Event 6). Households in rural areas with territorial occupation and use specificities, such as traditionally occupied territories, which historically have the greatest deficit in relation to adequate attendance by basic sanitation services (Brasil 2019; Guimarães, 2015) were therefore not entitled to the tariff and regulatory fixes. Neither were homeless people or those who do not have access to decent housing.

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<sup>17</sup> Concerning the limitations of Brazilian databases, see the following publication by the *Centro de Estudos em Regulação e Infraestrutura* [Centre for Studies on Regulation and Infrastructure] (FGV, 2018).

Thus, when Paulo Massato, metropolitan director of the largest basic sanitation company in the country, ends his presentation by saying that ‘these basic sanitation actions need to be intensified so that this lower income population has *at least the benefit of basic sanitation infrastructure*’ (Paulo Massato, Metropolitan Director of SABESP, Event 4; emphasis added), what is actually being proposed? If, on the one hand, Paulo Massato described the actions of donating water tanks to peripheral urban areas, Benedito Braga, president of the same company, detailed other measures adopted for the ‘poorer population’:

What then is our company doing at this very complicated time? We are collaborating with the population suffering the most, with the poorest population of our consumers. The first measure we took was that in the next three months, people who are on the social tariff and in favelas, they will not need to pay for water, they will receive water for free, right? (...) we had to have the approval of our Board of Directors, because this obviously involved significant costs on the part of the company (...), but the company understood that the poorest people would be the most impacted. Because this here not just a health crisis, it’s an economic crisis, right? (Benedito Braga, President of SABESP, Event 2)

The emergency measures put in place by the actor to guarantee continued provision for the ‘poorest’ users, were also adopted by the largest state companies in Brazil in terms of service coverage, such as *Companhia de Saneamento de Minas Gerais* (COPASA) [Water Supply Company of the State of Minas Gerais] and *Empresa Baiana de Águas e Saneamento* (EMBASA) [Water Services Company of the State of Bahia]. Free service seems to be a minimum condition for offering what was understood to be an essential service when facing a health crisis, which is necessary when facing a crisis that is also financial. However, the immediate solution is insufficient to address the problems raised by other actors, as observed in Event 7:

*At this time, we have faced several violations, violations in which public policies do not reach us, and other violations (...) the benefits that are set out for our people to access in this time of pandemic, they are overly bureaucratized, asking for numerous demands of people who don’t even have electricity, mobile phones (...) And we have appealed to the Quilombola Parliamentary Caucus, we have sought out the Federal Public Prosecutor’s Office, because our enemies, they do not sleep, even in the face of a pandemic as big as the one that we are living through in this country, our enemies counterattack our people daily through the withdrawal of rights, on the issue of weakening the public structures that work for the demands of Quilombolas, of Indigenous peoples and of traditional communities and also regarding the murders. It’s been four days since we lost a Quilombola leader who was murdered in Bahia. On the issue of evictions, in the middle of a pandemic, the Brazilian state, the Brazilian Justice [system] signs an eviction order for the Quilombolas of Alcântara, on the Alcântara Space Base (...) Among several other cases of conflicts that we have followed. (Biko Rodrigues, CONAQ representative, Event 7; emphasis added)*

Based on our analysis of Events 7 and 8, what emerges is an expansion of the interpretation of the emergency situation in which representatives of social movements claim historically violated rights, such as access to public health, a balanced environment, territorial and cultural rights. In these events, the actors include in their claims for ‘basic sanitation infrastructure’ the recognition and demarcation of land, actions on food security, the prohibition of eviction orders, the fight against conflicts and murders in rural areas and, emphatically, the actuation of public institutions in their territories.

From this we can suggest that there are three ‘levels’ of fixes presented in the events:

- **Material fixes:** the distribution of water tanks, water delivery in tanker trucks, hand sanitiser, and basic food baskets,
- **Socioeconomic fixes:** invoice exemption, guarantee of supply in cases of non-payment, the suspension of fines and interest for late payment, and the readjustment of contracts,



- **Political-institutional fixes:** the participation of the private sector in the sanitation sector at the national level and approval of the new legal framework in the Senate; the recognition of territories and land deeds; public food security policies; and the actuation of public institutions in their constitutional and legislative competences.

The solutions proposed by the president of SABESP – and by BRK and ABCON – cover two of these dimensions (material and socioeconomic), and hint at the political-institutional dimension – as observed in the intentionality of approving the new framework in the dialogues of Events 1 and 2. By considering that land titling, for example, does not form part of the issue of water and sewage distribution implies that part of the population will continue to be excluded from the provision of these services, which may mean that such claims were silenced or ignored by the competent actors. At Event 4, Paulo Massato answered a question ‘*from the people of Rio de Janeiro*’ concerning the legal obstacles to providing services in irregular areas. SABESP’s Metropolitan Director pointed out that ‘we have always had concerns about working with so-called irregular areas and actions involving public ministries, and potential actions against the company’ (Event 4). He concluded that, for these cases, ‘joint actions with municipal governments are necessary to seek land regularisation’.

The alternatives put forward throughout Events 2 and 4 for realities that circumvent urban planning and that lack housing structures, therefore, were reduced to the delivery of ‘hygiene kits’ – soap and hand sanitiser –, and efforts to mobilise water delivery in tanker trucks. While fundamental, these efforts erase the obligation to ensure the continued provision of such services – no intermittent service or prolonged rationing, and proper potability standards – as well as erasing the need to work with public policies on urban, rural and regional development, housing, combating poverty, and promoting health, thus considered local specificities (Brasil 2007; 2019).

Moreover, the fact that the strategies are presented in terms of ‘urgency’ and ‘exceptionality’ – terms used recurrently – is yet another aggravating factor. The very demands of the judiciary issue directives for actions to be adopted ‘during the period of the novel coronavirus pandemic’ (MPSP 2020: 25) or until we return to a ‘scenario of normality’ (MPRJ 2020: 28). On the one hand, this means the urgency is justified by the crisis situation, but on the other, it can be strategically used to divert attention from definitive and structural decisions.

Within this problematic, a question posed in the Event 5 chat provocatively questions the speaker: ‘How does the law interpret an emergency situation? In the scenario of subnormal conglomerates and ‘irregular’ territories (favelas, *Quilombos*, Indigenous lands), given the lack of sanitation, the public health situation has been an emergency for centuries’.

Is this an emergency? It is. When it’s been going on for years, it is theoretically no longer an emergency, because you manage to live with it [...] In truth, we can live without sanitation, isn’t that right? It’s what we’re living through. (PhD in Waste and founding partner of Martins Barbosa Advogados (Law Firm), Event 5).

The debate surrounding the emergency situation that ‘has been going on for years’ takes on clearer contours through the reports of non-governmental actors representing social movements, such as the Virtual Meeting of the Indigenous, *Quilombola*, Environmentalist Caucuses and the Amazon Forum (Event 7). Biko Rodrigues, representative of the National Coordination for the Articulation of Black Rural *Quilombola* Communities (CONAQ), begins his speech by emphasising the centuries of invisibility of traditional peoples and communities under the Brazilian state:

This moment we are going through is aggravating, it becomes even more aggravating due to a whole process, you know, a process of these most vulnerable segments not having access to public policies: Indigenous peoples, *Quilombola* communities, traditional peoples and communities. And this is getting even worse due to

this pandemic, right? We have encountered the state which has not responded to our demands (...) *so it's been 520 years of being forgotten by the Brazilian state, and this is reflected, this forgetfulness is reflected in what we see today.* (Biko Rodrigues, CONAQ representative, Event 7; emphasis added)

Characterising the situation posed by the pandemic as one aggravated by the vulnerability that has continuously been encountered by traditional territories, the actor shifts the previously presented narrative of 'emergency' and opens the path to question what parameters actors in the sanitation sector used to classify the current situation as a 'health crisis', an 'economic crisis', an 'unbalanced situation' and/or an 'exceptional situation'. In the event organised by the *Instituto Oceanográfico* [Oceanographic Institute] of the University of São Paulo (Event 8), the worsening of vulnerabilities is also exposed in the case of artisanal fishermen and women, and *caiçara* communities. Nuala Costa, leader of the *Todas para o Mar* [Women for the Sea Movement], points to the impact of the pandemic on the food security of fishing communities: 'Confinement is a class issue (...) Those who are hungry are in a hurry (...) The only way to be at home, is to be fed' (Event 8).

At the same event, Santiago Bernardes, coordinator of the *Fórum de Comunidades Tradicionais Angra-Paraty-Ubatuba* [Forum for Traditional Communities in Ubatuba, Paraty and Angra dos Reis], highlights the importance of solidarity networks<sup>18</sup> to guarantee food safety and hygiene products in communities: 'We made what we call the *'Solidarity Network'*, we buy products (...) and make this exchange. Of course, there is a lot of demand, not all communities are provided for, but we manage to get together and help out' (Event 8, emphasis added).

There is a pandemic economy that is not accounted for, which takes into consideration the functioning of forms of solidarity, of mutual aid and self-management in the circulation of agricultural and extractive products, which ensures greater autonomy for the community in the face of conventional tutelage: state agencies, churches and large merchants (...) It engenders forms of solidarity and action that can be approximated to *new ways of thinking about politics and acting politically with greater autonomy*, relativising the weight of tutelage and the strength of power relations, which seek to submit traditional peoples and communities to control mechanisms anchored in colonialist foundations (Almeida et al., 2020, p. 46, emphasis added).

The mentions of solidarity networks in Events 7 and 8 occurred in parallel to demands for the actuation of the state in these territories. Almeida et al. (2020), discuss the failure of the federal government towards traditional peoples and communities, observed mainly through: the lack of monitoring and regular, public disclosure of cases involving traditional peoples and communities; the absence of government measures to support sanitary-territorial protections through the provision of personal protective equipment; the absence of measures to protect traditional *Quilombola* and Indigenous land ownership during the pandemic, creating risks of forced collective displacement of these communities during a period of maximum vulnerability; the absence of an institutional instance of the state within the scope of the federal executive branch dedicated to the consultation and participation of the national representative entity for *Quilombola* and Indigenous peoples; the absence of minimally effective scaled, regular actions that enable food and nutritional security, such as the distribution of seeds, other agricultural inputs and basic food baskets.

Sonia Guajajara, coordinator of the Articulation of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB), emphasises the negligence of the competent official bodies at the federal level, in particular the *Secretaria Especial de Saúde Indígena* (SESAI) [Special Secretariat for Indigenous Health] and the *Fundação Nacional do Índio* (FUNAI)<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> UNICAMP publication mapped several solidarity networks active in the context of traditional territories during the pandemic: <https://www.unicamp.br/junicamp/index.php/noticias/2020/08/10/redes-de-solidariedade-o-enfrentamento-da-pandemia-nos-territorios-tradicionais>

<sup>19</sup> The former name is used here because all the documents pertaining to this study existed prior to a very recent change in name. On Jan. 1, 2023, one of the initial acts of the newly sworn in Lula government was to rename the FUNAI, now known as the *Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas* [National Indigenous Peoples Foundation], which together with the new Ministry for Indigenous Peoples, seeks to rectify the wrongful and frequently pejorative naming of Brazilian Indigenous people as '*índios*' [Indians] and move towards a new era in the government's relationships with the First Peoples of Brazil, one no longer regulated by military tutelage.

[National Indian Foundation] in monitoring cases in Indigenous territories, and the consequent creation of the *Comitê Nacional pela Vida e Memória Indígena* [National Committee for Indigenous Life and Memory]. This leader also reinforces the actions of the Indigenous movement in the centres of power.

*We at the APIB, we have also made a huge effort so that coping strategies are adopted, by the executive, the legislative, the judiciary and also among ourselves in the Indigenous movement. Right at the beginning, when the pandemic hit here in Brazil, we immediately wrote a letter to the federal government demanding the adoption of an emergency plan to deal with it. And then we presented measures to the SESAI, to the FUNAI, and we participated in all the meetings here in the caucus as well (...) some were met, others remain pending even today. Then we wrote a letter to all the governors, presenting 10 measures that each governor, you know, that each state could adopt, concrete actions to avoid contamination. Some states responded, others did not, and we are seeing the progress of this contamination among Indigenous peoples. (Sonia Guajajara, APIB Coordinator, Event 7; emphasis added)*

When entering the arena of political agenda formation, the consensus surrounding the ‘natural antidote’ turns into conflict (Heller, 2014). First, through an institutional-legal conflict, translated into whose responsibility it is to guarantee the antidote continuously and of the right quality for the diversity of users. In the case of traditional territories, the dispersion of competences – with the superposition and fragmentation of roles between jurisdictions – goes beyond the legal institutional dimension of the sanitation sector and falls to the ministries responsible for recognising territories and land regularisation. As Martha Seillier points out: ‘We saw that, in the federal government, basic sanitation was actually a universe of players’ (Event 3).

The institutional-legal conflict made evident by the scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic recalls the context of the early twentieth century. According to Hochman and Silva (2014), during the three decades of Brazil’s First Republic, Indigenous peoples ‘were outside the Brazilian public health agenda, the actions of its institutions and the reflections and concerns of its actors’. Invisibility was reinforced by omissions in the 1891 Constitution regarding dual recognition: of their very existence and their traditional lands (Coelho, 2002). Denounced by actors of Events 6 and 7, the invisibility of traditional peoples and communities in the public health agenda – despite the establishment of several national and institutional legal instruments<sup>20</sup> –, and the lack of coordination and organisation of the multiple competent institutions remains latent.

Ramos (2021: 55 and 56) draws attention to four actors within the scope of the federal executive branch with powers to promote water supply services in traditional territories – the *Secretaria Nacional de Saneamento* [National Secretariat for Sanitation], the *Agência Nacional de Águas* [National Water Agency], the Special Secretariat for Indigenous Health (SESAI) and the *Fundação Nacional de Saúde* [National Health Foundation] –, and four actors with powers to promote land recognition and land regularisation – the *Fundação Cultural Palmares* (FCP) [Palmares Cultural Foundation], the FUNAI, the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (ICMBIO) and the *Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária* (INCRA) [National Institute of Colonisation and Agrarian Reform]. Starting with the premise that the guarantee of a territory must occur before or in parallel with the guarantee of the right to health and a balanced environment, the articulation of a minimum of seven ministries is required in advance so that public policies<sup>21</sup> on health and the environment are fully realised in their plans and programmes.

20 International instrument: Convention no. 169 of the International Labour Organisation; National instruments: the 1988 Federal Constitution; the 2007 *Política Nacional de Desenvolvimento Sustentável dos Povos e Comunidades Tradicionais* [National Policy for the Sustainable Development of Traditional Peoples and Communities]. The different forms of legal recognition for modalities of appropriation of traditionally occupied lands can be found in Ramos (2021: 49).

21 Carvalho (2016) and Dedini and Ramos (2017) highlight ten national policies: National Water Resources Policy; National Basic Sanitation Policy; Urban Policy; National Health Policy; National Health Care Policy for Indigenous Peoples; National Health Care Policy for the Black Population; and the National Policy for the Comprehensive Health of Rural and Forest Populations; National Environmental Policy; and National Policy for the Sustainable Development of Traditional Peoples and Communities.

To this requisite articulation, the budgetary dimension and the institutional performance of these ministries must be added. In the last seven years, INCRA's budget has fallen by 94%<sup>22</sup>. At the beginning of 2022, all activities that involved displacement or that were assessed as 'non-urgent' were ordered to be suspended<sup>23</sup>. In the case of the Palmares Cultural Foundation, the Black movement denounced the dismantling of the institution<sup>24</sup>. The Indigenous movement, in turn, requested the initiation of a civil inquiry to investigate FUNAI's failure to demarcate Indigenous lands<sup>25</sup>. In this scenario, the *Organização Terra de Direitos* [Land Rights Organisation] estimates that Brazil will take 1,000 years to regularise all *Quilombola* territories. To regularise all traditional territories, the estimate is incalculable. The guideline, therefore, of 'universal sanitation by 2033' – placed in the newly approved framework – does not include the complexity of these multiple realities.

In addition to the political-institutional dimension, there is the epistemological conflict, translated as disagreements between which strategy should be implemented as a solution. Therefore, the need for an integrated vision of policy formulation and implementation is underscored, tensioning the frontiers of 'sanitation policies', 'health policies', 'environment policies' and 'land policies'. Lotta and Cavalcante (2021) argue that governments are facing increasingly complex and ambiguous environments, where traditional and 'departmentalised' solutions are no longer able to resolve them, requiring 'boundary-crossing initiatives'.

In dialogue with Backstrand et al (2010), these initiatives are fundamental in the case of socio-environmental problems – energy, climate, water, sewage – since they vary regarding their temporal and spatial effects. The authors identify a proliferation of 'new modes of environmental governance' in recent decades, in local, regional and global policies, characterised by less hierarchical and more collaborative governance arrangements via a 'deliberative turn'.

The 'promise' of these new arrangements, built through participatory and deliberative quality with governmental and non-governmental actors, enables moving from 'sanitation sector governance' to socio-environmental governance, in order to interweave material, socioeconomic and political-institutional fixes. The orchestrator of this interweaving is the technological-scientific dimension. The trajectory of Brazilian public health has been permeated by ideological disjunctions (Hochman and Silva, 2014), particularly the exclusive reverence for scientific knowledge anchored in racist and colonising practices. 'Indigenous people, *caboclos* and *sertanejos* were the *objects* of the scientists' gaze (...) These characters were the *new others*, foreigners in their own land' (2014: 88,89; emphasis added).

Interweaving these fixes under the 'universalist' perspective – generic and homogenising – that historically excluded and hierarchised knowledge (Carneiro, 2005) reproduces colonial actions in the face of different social identities in Brazil. Positioning socio-environmental governance in a field in which historically invisible subjects are the formulators and implementers of public health, sanitation, environmental, territorial, cultural, scientific and technological policies, as well as the executors of infrastructure projects, is to open the way for the 'pluriversalisation' (Njeri, 2020) of public services.

22 See: <https://cpisp.org.br/orcamento-incra-inviabiliza-titulacao-de-terras-quilombolas/>

23 See: <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2022/05/14/incra-suspende-atividades-e-cancela-eventos-externos-por-falta-de-verbas.ghtml>

24 See: <https://g1.globo.com/df/distrito-federal/noticia/2019/12/05/movimento-negro-faz-ato-em-brasilia-e-pede-suspensao-definitiva-do-presidente-da-fundacao-palmares.ghtml> and <https://www12.senado.leg.br/noticias/materias/2021/09/02/para-debatedores-fundacao-palmares-passa-por-desmonte-e-e-usada-para-pratica-de-racismo>

25 See: <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/apib-pede-o-afastamento-imedi-do-presidente-da-funai/>

## Conclusions

According to Susan Star (1999: 382), the spotlight on water supply infrastructure in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is explained by one property of infrastructures: they become ‘visible upon breakdown’. From the narratives analysed, it is evident that the global emergency in public health has impacted the provision of the service of supplying water. For Star (1999), these impacts make the infrastructure visible and demand fixes. However, how do you fix an unequal infrastructure in the short term? What were the strategies proposed by public institutions to ensure that vulnerable populations could ‘wash their hands’?

Through an ethnographic study, this paper sought to analyse the movements of strategic actors in sanitation governance in Brazil, in order to characterise their positions and indicate the actions that were being put into effect within the scope of the provision and regulation of water supply services. Browsing the debates and virtual forums, the analysis was expanded to non-governmental actors active in the major areas of public health, the environment, territory and culture. In the midst of the consensus surrounding the ‘natural antidote’, disputes over the concepts of ‘crisis’ and ‘emergency’, and over the different solutions proposed for the ‘infrastructure problem’, shaped the scenario of political-institutional and epistemological conflict in which the guarantee of basic needs are encountered.

Strategies proposed by legislative and executive actors at the federal level, together with representatives of regulatory agencies and public companies providing the service, were aimed at guaranteeing tariff adjustments, contractual adaptations and changes in legal instruments, such as the approval of the New Sanitation Legal Framework. Faced with a scenario of an ‘economic crisis’ and a ‘health crisis’, they produced ‘emergency’ fixes for this ‘now visible’ infrastructure.

‘How to see? Where to see from? What limits to vision? What to see for? Whom to see with?’ (Haraway 1988: 587). The vision of the sanitation sector actors – or the vision of the experts – is not ‘infinite’. Even with the spotlight turned on by the pandemic, the sector’s view is ‘partial’. In defence of situated knowledges, that is, those constructed by different subjects and from different territories, Haraway (1988) and Nowotny (2003) signal the need to interweave knowledges. Research in different disciplinary fields and in different countries elucidates the flaws in basic sanitation systems that are not constructed through local articulation (Machado, 2019; Figueiredo, 2019; Pena et al., 2019; Hueso, 2013; Clasen, 2014). In the current scenario and in the post-pandemic period, the emphasis on local specificities and the participation of different actors proves to be even more necessary. As raised by Telma Rocha: ‘COVID invites us to think systemically’ (Director of the Avina Foundation, Event 2).

In this sense, overcoming the historical and unequal deficit of water supply in the short term was not observed. Specific actions for the distribution of water tanks, hygiene kits, and tariff adjustments did not establish institutional structures capable of guaranteeing continued provision for the diversity of territories in Brazil<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, the weakening of institutions of the federal executive branch that enable the consolidation of a sanitation policy interweaved with environmental, territorial, cultural, science and technology policies, in addition to gutting councils and participatory commissions, deconstructs the pillars of socio-environmental governance. On the other hand, ‘market governance’ (Backstrand et al., 2010) is strengthened with the growing discourse in favor of privatization, deregulation and market mechanisms.

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<sup>26</sup> The *Instituto Água e Saneamento* [Water and Sanitation Institute] maintains the bureau tasked with overseeing the implementation of the new legal framework, indicating advances and challenges in states and municipalities: <https://marcolegal.aguaesaneamento.org.br/>

The answer to the question – how can we overcome this historical deficit or how do we guarantee the fulfilment of basic needs in the current political conjuncture? – can be reinforced by a stratum on how to monitor the fulfilment of basic needs in the current political conjuncture. Nader (1972: 294) reminds us that citizens need to have access to information and knowledge concerning the main institutions, government or otherwise, that affect their lives. The ethnographic commitment of Brazilian researchers has enabled and continues to enable the description, analysis and monitoring of public institutions (Teixeira et al, 2019). ‘It is in the search for ways out and to escape from the plot that entangles us in the current historical moment that it is necessary to continue, to expand and to probe deeper (...) A lot of work is done, and much more is left to do’ (Lima and Facina, 2019: 474). As Biko Rodrigues concludes: ‘it’s important that we’re always united, because what lies ahead, the post-pandemic, is going to cause even more difficulties for our people’ (CONAQ Representative, Event 7).

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*Entre la teoría y el barrio:*  
Etnografía caminante, política  
gubernamental y matriz académica en  
un programa de urbanización integral  
del hábitat en el Nordeste Argentino

Valeria Ojeda

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### Resumen

En este trabajo me interesa marcar cómo se intersectan las matrices académicas y de gestión, cuando se trata de coordinar el diseño y la implementación de una política gubernamental de urbanización integral del hábitat. A partir de una experiencia de trabajo que me comprometió en tanto gestora proveniente del ámbito académico, busco describir con la mayor densidad posible, la incidencia de categorías del campo científico en la producción y puesta en marcha de proyectos impulsados desde el programa. Estas nuevas dimensiones significaron la emergencia de tensiones en los abordajes tradicionales de la cuestión social en el Programa de Mejoramiento de Barrios (PRO.ME.BA), tanto a nivel de las y los trabajadores del programa, como de los mismos ciudadanos (antes “población destinataria”), en una provincia del nordeste argentino.

**Palabras clave:** política gubernamental; participación académica; entes estatales; etnografías del Estado; trabajadores públicos; hábitat.

# *Entre a teoria e o bairro:* Etnografia andante, política governamental e matriz acadêmica num programa de urbanização integral do habitat no nordeste da Argentina

## **Resumo**

Neste trabalho estou interessada em marcar como as matrizes acadêmica e gerencial se cruzam, quando se trata de coordenar o desenho e implementação de uma política do governo para a urbanização integral do habitat. A partir de uma experiência de trabalho que me comprometeu como gerente vindo do campo acadêmico, procuro descrever com a maior densidade possível, a incidência de categorias do campo científico na produção e implementação de projetos promovidos a partir do programa. Essas novas dimensões significaram o surgimento de tensões nas abordagens tradicionais da questão social no Programa de Melhoria do Bairro (PRO.ME.BA), tanto no nível dos trabalhadores do programa, quanto dos próprios cidadãos (anteriormente “população-alvo”), em uma região província da Argentina.

**Palavras-chave:** políticas governamentais; participação acadêmica; entidades estatais; etnografias do Estado; servidores públicos; habitat.

# *Between theory and the 'barrio'*

## Walking ethnography, governmental policy and academic matrix in an integral habitat urbanization program in Northeastern Argentina

### **Abstract**

In this work I am interested in marking how the academic and management matrices intersect, when it comes to coordinating the design and implementation of a government policy for the integral urbanization of the habitat. From a work experience that committed me as a manager from the academic field, I seek to describe with the greatest possible density, the incidence of categories of the scientific field in the production and implementation of projects promoted from the program. These new dimensions meant the emergence of tensions in the traditional approaches to the social issue in the Neighborhood Improvement Program (PRO.ME.BA), both at the level of the workers of the program, and of the citizens themselves (before “target population”), in a province in northeastern Argentina.

**Keywords:** government policy; academic participation; state entities; ethnographies of the State; public workers; habitat.

# *Entre la teoría y el barrio:* Etnografía caminante, política gubernamental y matriz académica en un programa de urbanización integral del hábitat en el Nordeste Argentino

Valeria Ojeda

## Introducción

Con algunos rasgos de etnografía, este artículo pretende aportar a la discusión respecto de cómo se asume la participación académica en la operativización de una política gubernamental<sup>1</sup>. En particular me centraré en una experiencia de trabajo entre 2016 y 2019, en el marco del denominado “Programa de Mejoramiento Barrial” (PRO. ME.BA.), política de urbanización integral del hábitat destinada a sectores social y territorialmente excluidos (villas y asentamientos irregulares), que se desarrolló en la provincia de Río Revuelto<sup>2</sup>, en el Nordeste Argentino.

La apuesta que estructura esta contribución implicó recuperar algunos elementos teóricos que configuraron mi acceso al campo como académica con funciones de gestión, en clave etnográfica aun cuando la elección de este enfoque, y especialmente la selección de las categorías de análisis operaron post facto. De tal manera, entiendo significativo reconocer las reflexividades que promueven esta lectura, y que asimismo fueron las que estructuraron aquella práctica profesional/observación participante. Es un atavío del cual, siguiendo a Bourdieu (y aun desconociéndolo), no podría despojarme. De hecho, son la adscripción académica e inscripción territorial/profesional en el marco del programa, los elementos desde donde modelizaré, no sólo el contenido de esta presentación, sino también el lenguaje desde el cual pretendo comunicarlos.

Teniendo como telón de fondo las características de los procesos de trabajo en el Estado, y sosteniéndome metodológicamente en las etnografías del Estado para recuperar las formas en las cuales éste se expresa en torno a su vinculación con/en lo social<sup>3</sup>, desandaré dos grandes categorías organizadoras que se irán tejiendo en el relato:

- Diálogos y tensiones sobre lo social, su contenido y su tratamiento
- El componente político, el componente técnico y el necesario posicionamiento académico.

1 Utilizaré la noción de política gubernamental, en tanto “ações e tecnologias de governo formuladas não só desde organizações administrativas de Estados nacionais, mas também a partir de diferentes modalidades de organizações que estão fora desse âmbito mas que exercem funções de governo Antonio Carlos Sousa Lima y Joao Paulo Macedo e Castro (2015, p. 35).

En este sentido, organizaciones no gubernamentales, movimientos sociales, la propia academia, así como organismos multilaterales de crédito, fomento de cooperación internacional, otorgan sentido y dirección al trazado de las políticas “Isto implica dizer que a identificação de problemas sociais, a formulação de planos de ação governamental, se dão concretamente em múltiplas escalas espaciais, com temporalidades variáveis, no entrecruzamento de amplos espaços de disputa, muitas vezes desconectados entre si em aparência, conquanto sua implementação mais direta possa estar (mesmo que dependente de forças sociais para além do local ou nacional) circunscrita a um espaço mais restrito, e a avaliação de seus resultados nem mesmo chegue a acontecer” (Sousa Lima y Macedo e Castro, 2015, p. 35).

2 Para este artículo he decidido asignar un nombre de fantasía a la provincia, a fin de no especificar marcas territoriales concretas, y por lo tanto no comprometer a gestores y trabajadores del programa especialmente. De todos modos, tal como se menciona en el título, me refiero a una provincia del Nordeste Argentino.

3 A nivel internacional, los ensayos pioneros de Abrams, Gupta y Mitchell (2015) han abierto el camino hacia perspectivas del Estado menos reificadas. En Argentina, los trabajos de Frederic, Graciano y Soprano (2010) y Pantaleón (2004), son excelentes ejemplos de etnografías elaboradas a partir de experiencias en organismos del Estado.

El recorte temporal seleccionado responde, no solamente a la etapa de mi inserción en el programa, sino a un momento de alineamiento político-ideológico entre el gobierno nacional y el gobierno provincial, el cual arrojó interesantes resultados a nivel de la dinámica establecida entre ambos niveles del Estado, que intentaré esbozar en este trabajo.

En cuanto a la organización de este artículo, lo he estructurado de la siguiente forma: en primer término, presento un conjunto de propuestas conceptuales que operarán como ejes de la descripción acerca de cómo la participación académica dialoga/aporta y/o condiciona la operativización de esta política gubernamental de urbanización del hábitat, y que constituye la segunda parte del artículo. En un movimiento dialéctico, esta descripción densa del problema, intentará recuperar los tonos y matices propios del territorio y de los intercambios, en vinculación con los ejes conceptuales aludidos en la primera porción del texto. Finalmente, a manera de cierre, expongo algunos interrogantes derivados de la experiencia etnografiada.

Actores, lugares, caminos, problemas. Todas dimensiones de la geografía de un barrio, y asimismo del trabajo en el marco de un programa de urbanización. Re-transitarlas permitirá conocer, identificar (¿quizás comprender?) el pasaje del mapa al territorio, del plan a lo vívido, en donde la academia (o los actores académicos) nos asumimos en permanente discusión. O no.

## Primera Parte: coordenadas teóricas de una académica en clave de gestión

Hacia poco tiempo que había finalizado mi beca posdoctoral en CONICET<sup>4</sup> cuando accedí a aquel trabajo en PROMEBA. Ya había escuchado es nombre, me resultaba conocido. En realidad, sonaba a “*El PROMEBA*”<sup>5</sup>, un programa estatal con entidad, pregnancia, y con bastante trayectoria y antigüedad en Río Revuelto<sup>6</sup>, lo cual lo instalaba en la agenda pública y especialmente en los medios de comunicación. No sabía muy bien qué hacía este PROMEBA, pero al igual que muchos otros PRO.ME. (programas de mejoramiento, por sus siglas), su objetivo parecía claro: pasar de una situación X a otra “mejor”.

### a) La participación académica

Lo llamativo es que, aunque en aquel momento lo interpretara como un espacio “desconocido”, no tardé en corroborar que no concurríamos al campo desprovistos de teoría: estas experiencias son significadas desde los marcos conceptuales construidos a lo largo de toda nuestra trayectoria formativa (tanto académica, como laboral y social). De allí que fuera Bourdieu quien me “*susurrara al oído*” muchas de las características que iría asumiendo mi rol en PRO.ME.BA, en tanto una migrante del campo académico. No sin problematizaciones, la primera de ellas fue comprender que me encontraba en otro juego, con un sistema de relaciones objetivas que era construido ya no desde la competencia por la autoridad científica, sino apoyado en la legitimidad de quienes llevaban “más tiempo” en el campo y “conocían las reglas del juego político y administrativo”.

4 CONICET es el Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, el principal organismo vinculado a la producción de ciencia y tecnología en Argentina.

5 Utilizaré *italica entrecorrida* para referir a diálogos casuales, recortes textuales de conversaciones, y/o modos/frases de circulación en medios de comunicación o en el acervo comunicacional de las personas involucradas en este artículo.

6 Su primer desembarco data del año 2009.

7 Bourdieu (1994), en “El campo científico” sostiene que la adquisición de diferentes posiciones relativas y la construcción de relaciones objetivas entre esas posiciones implica cierta historicidad dentro del campo, del espacio de juego, a fin de competir por la autoridad (131).

Las lógicas del campo académico, en tanto espacio caracterizado, principalmente, por la primacía de saberes y conocimientos resultantes de procesos de investigación, también resultó interpelada durante esta experiencia, y en dos sentidos. El primero de ellos se vincula con las diferentes temporalidades<sup>8</sup> que operan en cada campo. Mientras que en la academia los procesos de generación de conocimiento son traccionados por la dinámica de los procesos cognitivos (de comparación, de reflexión, de análisis), y por lo tanto requieren de mayor tiempo material para su producción, el día a día de la gestión discurre ante la urgencia y la necesidad de resolver problemas acuciantes. En relación a esto, también la extrapolación de los métodos de trabajo de la academia (reuniones, encuentros, espacios de “discusión”), a los espacios de la planificación de política gubernamental implicaba la puesta en cuestionamiento del alcance de tales métodos para la obtención de “soluciones”. En tanto, el segundo punto tiene que ver con las variables que ingresan en la planificación y valoración de los proyectos, y que se encuentran fuertemente impregnadas de la territorialidad que les da sentido. La validez de cada una de esas variables dependerá del valor asignado por los múltiples actores con múltiples adscripciones sociopolíticas que ingresen a la producción de la política gubernamental<sup>10</sup>.

Finalmente, la naturaleza de aquellos objetivos de gestión bajo mi responsabilidad, y que pudieron haber irrespetado los procesos de maduración, decantación y más que nada apropiación de las iniciativas (tanto las generadas desde el área social de PRO.ME.BA, como las genuinamente producidas desde el barrio), y que pudieron haber sido interpretados desde criterios poco realistas y/o voluntaristas<sup>11</sup>

Mi atavío de investigadora social significó mucho de las realidades que transitara durante aquella experiencia. Asimismo, como trabajadora del programa, ¿cuáles eran las posibilidades que existían de poder incidir en la ejecución/desarrollo de política gubernamental desde el diálogo con todo lo académico que venía inscripto en mí? ¿cuánto de la academia se expresó en mis intervenciones “en territorio”? ¿fue necesario “disimular” la procedencia? O en todo caso ¿qué disimulé? ¿qué cuestiones “maquillé”? ¿qué aspectos de la formación académica resultaron favorecedores/dinamizadores de la política gubernamental? ¿Cuáles por el contrario operaron en contra? ¿Cómo responder este variopinto conjunto?

Este relato en clave etnográfica, recupera el tránsito por este programa, a partir de una observación participante privilegiada y asimismo condicionada por mis subjetividades. Intentaré desanudar estas preguntas poniendo especial énfasis en recuperar las posibles reflexividades que emergieron durante aquella etapa, y que luego de algunos años, afloran abonadas de apuestas teóricas, para interpretar el trabajo del “área social” de PROMEBA.

Algunos de los aspectos conceptuales que propongo como ejes para esta descripción, y que expongo a continuación, son los que pusieron en tensión la construcción de mi capital cultural, interpelándolos y movilizándome (no sin resistencias) hacia una reconfiguración de mi *hábitus* profesional. Esta distancia entre campos y el proceso de reelaboración al cual estoy aludiendo, es lo que Sánchez Dromundo (2007, p. 9) expone cuando sostiene que “al variar los habitus de un campo a otro la posibilidad de una mayor integración depende de la compatibilidad entre el habitus imperante en un campo, con el que posee el sujeto”.

8 Según Iparraguirre(2017), en “Imaginario del Desarrollo. Gestión política y científica de la cultura” las temporalidades implican actitudes ante el devenir, que están fuertemente impregnadas por la dimensión territorial (situadas en un contexto sociohistórico determinado).

9 No era raro escuchar entre vecinos y vecinas comentarios del tipo “esto ya se dijo hace seis meses”, “otra vez con lo mismo y no arreglan nada”, “no vengo más a las reuniones porque siempre lo mismo”.

10 Como expondré más adelante, la ciudadanía participaba en la definición de algunas de las decisiones en torno al proyecto de urbanización integral del hábitat analizado, a partir de algunos lineamientos derivados de las metodologías PPGA (Planificación Participativa y Gestión Asociada-FLACSO).

11 En la segunda parte de este artículo doy cuenta de tal desencuentro, a partir de la experiencia del proyecto “Mujeres Emprendedoras”.



## b) La cuestión del hábitat

Las políticas de urbanización del hábitat constituyen un importante eje de atención en el abanico de políticas gubernamentales que se desarrollan en Argentina en la actualidad. Sin embargo, esto no fue siempre así. La focalización y actuación del Estado en territorios segregados de la ciudad “formal” (villas, asentamientos, barrios populares, con importantes déficits habitacionales, de accesibilidad, salud, conectividad, laborales y sociales), a partir de programas tales como el que abordo en este artículo, no formaba parte de los intereses del Estado argentino en las últimas tres décadas del siglo pasado. Como comenta Rodríguez et. al (2007), incluso constituían segmentos que eran ocultados ex profeso<sup>12</sup>.

La intensidad y alcance de las iniciativas estatales en materia de hábitat y vivienda, lógicamente se vio condicionada por la dinámica de los modelos político-económicos (y sus correspondientes expresiones a nivel gubernamental) a lo largo de casi cuatro décadas. Desde la creación del FO.NA.VI. (Fondo Nacional del Vivienda) en 1972, la política habitacional hizo fuerte énfasis en la producción de vivienda en relación a la dinamización del sector construcción como fuente de desarrollo<sup>13</sup>. Esto significaba una relación directa entre la política habitacional, y las necesidades y demandas del mercado inmobiliario. El foco no estaba puesto en los sujetos, el hábitat o el ambiente.

La degradación de la situación económica y social, fruto del avance del modelo neoliberal, entre los años 70's e inicios de la década del 2000, no hizo más que profundizar la situación de exclusión, pobreza y deterioro de la situación general de un cada vez mayor porcentaje de la población argentina. Afloraron entonces los procesos masivos de producción del hábitat, tales como las tomas de tierras y ocupaciones de edificios, con el agravante de tratarse de localizaciones urbanas sin acceso a infraestructura de bienes y servicios básicos<sup>14</sup>.

El PRO.ME.BA. es un caso paradigmático, y representa el regreso a la escena del Estado como mecanismo de morigeración del impacto de la crisis. Este programa, financiado por el Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, y que se empezó a implementar durante la segunda mitad de la década del 1990, operó durante los gobiernos de Néstor Kirchner y Cristina Fernández como parte de la dinamización de las políticas de empleo y contención social. De allí que las intervenciones, desplazaran la noción netamente habitacional, para empezaran a constituir “urbanizaciones integrales del hábitat”.

Pero ¿en qué radica la integralidad de la estrategia? Básicamente en la atención interdisciplinaria al problema de la urbanización. Por lo tanto, el área de actuación involucraría elementos tanto de políticas de mejoramiento del hábitat (infraestructura básica, dotación de equipamiento urbano, trazado y delimitación de calles, creación de espacios públicos), como políticas de fortalecimiento educativo, atención a la salud, acceso a bienes culturales, y promoción de la participación ciudadana.

Cada uno de los proyectos que integra el PRO.ME.BA. son formulados por estamentos del Estado a nivel municipal y provincial, los cuales luego son elevados desde las Unidades Ejecutoras Provinciales (UEP en adelante) o Municipales (UEM) al Ministerio o Área encargada de la Planificación Territorial a nivel nacional. Generalmente esta última se condensa en algún ministerio de planificación, obras y servicios públicos, y/o subsecretarías de vivienda o desarrollo urbano (según la estructura orgánica que presente el Estado Nacional).

12 “En muchos casos, esas formas masivas de producción urbana fueron (y a veces son) lisa y llanamente negadas: basta mirar ciertos mapas oficiales de décadas precedentes, donde las villas porteñas o rosarinas lucen como ‘espacios verdes’” (Rodríguez et al., 2007, p. 9).

13 “Este modelo de política habitacional se fundamentaba en la idea de que la producción masiva de vivienda favorecería el desarrollo sostenido de la industria de la construcción, permitiendo superar el déficit y beneficiando a la economía en su conjunto a través de su impacto sobre el empleo y su vinculación con otros sectores ligados a la industria de la construcción” (Rodríguez et al., 2007, p. 36).

14 “El significativo aumento de las tasas de desocupación ocurrido durante la década del noventa y los primeros años del 2000, y la ampliación de las desigualdades en la distribución del ingreso (Altimir y Beccaria, 2001) impactaron fuertemente sobre la posibilidad que tiene la población de bajos ingresos de acceder a través de mecanismos de mercado al hábitat” (Rodríguez et al., 2007, p. 35).

Los proyectos y su viabilidad son evaluados en este nivel y la asignación de los fondos BID “baja<sup>15</sup>” a provincias y municipios, vía ministerios de economía y finanzas provinciales.

Como puede evidenciarse, son varios y de diferentes niveles los estamentos del Estado que tienen injerencia en la construcción de esta política gubernamental. En el caso del proyecto que describo en este artículo, era diseñado e implementado por una Unidad Ejecutora Provincial, que asimismo dependía del Ministerio de Economía y Hacienda de Río Revuelto. Pero en su planificación, especialmente a partir de 2016, ingresaron a la ecuación especialistas en PPGA (Planificación Participativa y Gestión Asociada)<sup>16</sup> de FLACSO, investigadores de CONICET y de la Universidad Nacional del Nordeste, dotando a los proyectos de una complejidad hasta el momento desconocida en este tipo de abordajes: lo político-cultural, lo sociocultural, lo económico, incluso lo recreativo y ambiental, todas dimensiones de la vida comunitaria, interpeladas por la noción de promoción de la participación, traccionada por la inserción “académica”.

### c) El Proyecto Urbano Integral “El Pote”

En el diseño de cada uno de los proyectos, las demandas de la población definían el contenido de la intervención. Sin embargo, en el Proyecto Urbano Integral (en adelante PUI) “El Pote”, esta atención no implicaba solamente un proceso de negociación de necesidades.

Con la incorporación de actores del sector académico a la elaboración del proyecto, se incluyeron metodologías participativas que modificaron su matriz de producción. Quienes antaño representaban el rol pasivo de “beneficiarios”, mutaron su papel a decisores colectivos sobre la configuración de su hábitat. O por lo menos constituía uno de los principales objetivos de la intervención.

En el caso del PUI “El Pote”, el propósito era

promover la cohesión comunitaria, a través del fomento de la participación, la educación para la convivencia y el fortalecimiento de organizaciones y redes vecinales. Además, propiciar la inclusión social a través de la generación de oportunidades de desarrollo en el territorio, la promoción de la equidad urbana y cultural, y el reconocimiento, valoración y potenciación de la diversidad de modos de vida de la población. Y, por último, promover la integración física y social de los barrios a la ciudad formal<sup>17</sup>

En tanto estrategia de intervención integral, se buscaba acceder a cada uno de los vecinos y vecinas de los barrios que integraban el área de intervención. Por lo tanto, y ante esta “visión holística del hábitat”, toda la trama social se veía comprometida en la participación: adultos mayores, adultos y jóvenes, adolescentes y niños partícipes de este proceso de urbanización, de integración a la ciudad formal, en razón del rol (madres, padres, ciudadanos y ciudadanas) y las responsabilidades que les competían. De ello, se interpretaba que las “mejoras” a las cuales aludía esta política de urbanización, ya no repercutirían solamente en las cuestiones “duras” de índole infraestructural. El progreso entonces, estaría representado por aquellos aprendizajes colectivos relativos al mismo proceso de urbanización, tales como “acceso y promoción de bienes culturales, iniciativas comunitarias de participación política, mesas de gestión, estrategias de empoderamiento de mujeres, iniciativas de asociación y/o cooperación entre trabajadores”, entre otros.

15 Cravino et al. (2001) basadas en Rockwell, sugieren que la noción de que algo “baja”, expone en términos metafóricos, un esquema de relaciones simbólicamente jerarquizadas, en donde los actores “que reciben” se encuentran en situaciones de subordinación, y por lo cual se marca de forma más patente la inexorable asimetría y desigualdad de la relación.

16 Las PPGA [son] “una concepción de cómo formular las políticas, cómo formular los planes o programas, y cómo establecer las relaciones entre actores de diversos campos y de diversas escalas” (Poggiese, 2011, p. 16).

17 Proyecto Ejecutivo Integral 2016 – Proyecto “El Pote”.

Ahora, ¿sobre qué andariveles discurriría la participación promocionada? Claramente las marcas de territorialidad asociadas a la persistencia de actitudes pasivas y demandantes para con el Estado (en términos de prácticas asistencialistas generadoras y profundizadoras de subjetividades subalternas), contribuían a “profundizar la desconfianza frente a las iniciativas que requieren de la construcción colectiva” (Ramírez y Leconte, 2019, p. 573). El trazado de esta política gubernamental de urbanización integral, iniciaba entonces signada por estas marcas, que harían mucho más complicada la promoción de la participación. En cierta forma, y durante el período que abordo en este artículo, el trabajo del Programa estuvo en correr los límites del entendimiento acerca del rol político que le cabe a la ciudadanía, más allá de los de naturaleza cívico-política. Son, en términos de Ramírez y Leconte, “prácticas embrionarias de transformación social” (Ramírez y Leconte, 2019, p. 574), de establecimiento de lazos (más o menos fortalecidos) entre los actores de la sociedad civil y los organismos públicos, calificados ya no desde la asimetría<sup>18</sup>, sino desde la posibilidad de “*hacerse escuchar*”<sup>19</sup>. Pero, como expongo más adelante, el andamiaje provisto por los actores “novedosos” en la producción de la política (la academia), en tanto participación tutelada, pudo no haber sido el adecuado.

#### d) Estado, trabajo y trabajadores

Sostenía en la introducción de este artículo, que los procesos de trabajo en el Estado constituían el *background* desde donde interpretar las relaciones, aproximaciones e intercambios surgidos en la experiencia de trabajo en PRO.ME.BA. Me parece importante también establecer que las dimensiones especialmente vinculadas al Trabajo que traccionan esta etnografía, forman parte de una trama más compleja que estructura la línea de investigación que vengo desarrollando hace más de diez años junto a un equipo de la UNNE, y que pone al Estado y al empleo estatal en el foco del análisis<sup>20</sup>: sus formas y modos de ejecución, las lógicas y razones que lo habitan, los discursos que le dan sentido, las maneras de aprender y comprender la dinámica del empleo público, los vínculos que produce, reproduce y alimenta. Todo ello caleidoscópicamente leído desde quienes le ponen huesos, carne y espíritu a este monstruo llamado Estado: los empleados públicos.

La organización del proceso de trabajo, o mejor dicho las diversas configuraciones de este proceso que conviven en el nivel provincial del Estado, presentan una gama de características que están fuertemente determinadas por las condiciones que asume la estructura productiva en una provincia como Río Revuelto. Históricamente asociada a esquemas sociopolíticos conservadores, los indicadores acerca del mercado de trabajo dan cuenta de una incidencia muy importante del empleo en la administración pública provincial, con una incidencia en la estructura laboral del 76,3% del empleo privado formal durante el año 2015<sup>21</sup>.

Antecedentes teóricos indican que esta situación, fruto de un esquema de desarrollo productivo más debilitado si lo comparamos con los de los centros urbanos argentinos de mayor relevancia (Pampa Húmeda, Zona Centro), se sostiene sobre “formas de articulación entre las sociedades tradicionales y las nuevas agroindustrias, la persistencia de sociedades marginadas de esa articulación, el comportamiento de las élites,

18 La asimetría continuará condensándose en muchas otras dimensiones.

19 “Así, consideramos que las relaciones que se establecen entre los actores de la sociedad civil y los organismos públicos contienen las marcas de los contextos socioterritoriales en que se desenvuelven, a la vez que construyen una espacialidad propia formada principalmente por la cobertura territorial o las escalas de referencia de las relaciones y de las actividades, que se superpone sobre la estructura político-administrativa del Estado en la región. Las particularidades propias del territorio ayudan a explicar el desarrollo de las experiencias de gestión participativa al condicionar las características socioeconómicas y políticas de los actores, entre otros factores. La estructura socioeconómica del territorio, el grado de desarrollo de la institucionalidad política local y las características del mundo asociativo de la sociedad civil, entre varias otras condiciones territoriales, inciden en el despliegue de los instrumentos de políticas de diseño participativo en el ámbito local” (Couto et al., 2016, p. 76-77).

20 PI19Moos5 - Secretaría General de Ciencia y Técnica - Universidad Nacional del Nordeste.

21 Ministerio de Hacienda y Finanzas, 2017.

y los procesos recientes de expansión agropecuaria” (Bolsi y Meichtry, 2006, p. 1). El entrecruzamiento de todos estos aspectos, da cuenta de resultados económicos y territoriales que se inscriben en la trama histórico-cultural de las provincias que componen esta región nordeste.

Es de atención entonces, la dimensión vinculada a la relación entre los modelos sociopolíticos tradicionales, y su persistencia y traspolación al interior de las estructuras administrativas del Estado. Esta inscripción de la matriz cultural se expresa de manera concreta en los modos de gestionar la fuerza de trabajo, de organizar sus procesos (lejos de alguna pretendida racionalidad burocrática), y de interpretar y significar el trabajo por parte de los propios estatales<sup>22</sup>.

Por lo tanto, el trabajo, especialmente el desarrollado en las condiciones que describiré en la próxima parte de este artículo, deja de constituirse en fuente de derechos, para configurarse como un espacio de repliegue de los mismos. La precariedad laboral, entendida no sólo desde su aspecto registral (poseer un empleo declarado), sino también desde los múltiples factores que afectan las subjetividades<sup>23</sup>, se expresaba de manera contundente entre las y los trabajadores de PRO.ME.BA, en tanto se asumían “estatales”. Asimismo, en tanto es el mismo Estado quien regula y violenta sus propias instituciones, la precariedad en este espacio en particular se presentará desde una densa trama de dimensiones<sup>24</sup>.

La precarización laboral implicará la aparición de estrategias de sostenimiento de la continuidad laboral, en tanto mecanismos de cobertura/protección (individual o colectiva) que construyen los trabajadores a fin de sostenerse ante este tipo de escenario<sup>25</sup>, y que asimismo van instituyendo diversas lógicas de construcción del espacio laboral estatal<sup>26</sup>. Es el mexicano De la Garza Toledo quien habla de la noción de “escenarios de trabajo”, en tanto la manera en que se conciben y estructuran los procesos, en el marco de las estrategias, lo que finalmente se traduce en el contenido de la actividad.

Son estos empleados estatales, burócratas de nivel callejero en términos de Lipsky (1980), es decir “servidores públicos que interactúan directamente con los ciudadanos en el curso de su trabajo, y que gozan de considerable discrecionalidad en su ejecución, quienes llevarán adelante la política gubernamental, cualquiera sea ella”. El marco asumirá distintos matices, pero finalmente será el de lo público estatal como expresión de la voluntad del Estado. El rol de los burócratas de calle en la consumación de la voluntad estatal es insoslayable. De ello que este artículo pretenda etnografiar cómo la matriz académica incidió en la construcción de una *experiencia laboral* al interior del Estado provincial, desde una política gubernamental de urbanización integral del hábitat.

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22 Si bien constituye una noción con una fuerte carga dinámica, “El conservadorismo, los lazos sociales interclase sustentados en patrones de semi-feudalismo, el caudillismo y el liderazgo paternalista, son factores que permanecen sin condicionantes según la perspectiva que sostiene gran parte de la comunidad científica de la región [Sin embargo], es Rosana Guber quien plantea una ruptura, o por lo menos un punto de atención sobre estas nociones. La investigadora sostiene que la conjunción de estos factores, (lo cultural) “no sería una “superestructura” ni un dominio nítido de la realidad, sino una fuerza constitutiva de las formas de existencia sociales” (Guber, 2000; Ojeda, 2016).

23 Adriana Marshall (1990) habla de “empleo incierto” para aludir a aquellos empleos que además de no poseer registración, impactan desde su configuración a nivel simbólico en los sujetos y que recortan su potencial emancipador (jornadas extenuantes, insatisfacción laboral, imposibilidad de planificar la vida personal y familiar).

24 Nicolás Diana Menéndez (2010) alude a la “multidimensionalidad de la precariedad en el sector público”, identificando ocho dimensiones en las cuales esta situación de vulnerabilidad laboral se expresa (falta de estabilidad, deterioro de las condiciones de trabajo, incertidumbre/insuficiencia en el ingreso, reducción de la protección y seguridad social, deterioro del reconocimiento práctico y simbólico de la realidad del trabajo, inestabilidad política del vínculo laboral, heterogeneización laboral, falta de representación sindical).

25 “Los trabajadores desenvuelven toda una gama de estrategias con un único fin: recuperar el protagonismo perdido en la escena laboral del empleo público. [...] La escena laboral en la administración del Estado provincial se impregna de esta lógica operacional: preservarse, crecer, mantenerse, constituyen también objetivos a partir de los cuales los trabajadores resisten. Aquí ingresa el balance racional, a partir del cual evaluarán su rol, sus posibilidades y las estrategias que desenvolverán” (Ojeda, 2016:650) [RESUELTO]

26 En el empleo estatal especialmente refleja el control, categoría heredera de la más estricta burocracia, pero también fuertemente emparentada con la noción de poder y su sostenimiento.

## Segunda parte: académicas de barrio

### La UEP<sup>27</sup>

Eran los primeros días de abril de 2017 cuando me presenté en la oficina del PRO.ME.BA. Las escaleras de mármol, imponentes antaño, ahora desvencijadas y descoloridas, me dieron la fría bienvenida al edificio donde funcionaba también otro importante ministerio. Un policía, entre somnoliento y desconfiado, me indicó que debía subir hasta el primer piso, y luego a la izquierda. Allí me estaría esperando la persona que me había comentado sobre aquella posibilidad laboral. También proveniente de la academia y con responsabilidades que se intersectaban entre un proyecto de investigación y la gestión del “*área social*” bajo una “*perspectiva renovadora*”, Maite me recibió con una amplia sonrisa entre “*cómplice y aliviada*”. “*Soy una de ellas*<sup>28</sup>”, pensé. Unas semanas antes me había entrevistado junto las autoridades del programa, luego de un proceso de selección en el que buscaban un perfil para “*coordinar el área social*<sup>29</sup>” que pudiera traccionar la “*refundación*<sup>30</sup>” de las formas del hacer y del entender lo social al interior del Programa.

El sitio destinado a las oficinas de la UEP PROMEBBA era un intrincado laberinto. “*En casa de herrero*<sup>31</sup>...”, me preguntaba cómo en un espacio colmado de ingenieros y arquitectos, la infraestructura y la disposición de los equipamientos y mobiliario podía llegar a ser un verdadero desafío a las normas de construcción (¡y de evacuación!). Entrepisos sobre entrepisos, puertas a puertas, boxes con inadecuada o inexistente ventilación, cajas y grandes paquetes sobre los pisos de madera. La sensación imperante era la de una permanente mudanza (y que no resultaba extraña para trabajadores contratados en calidad de prestadores de servicio, y por lo tanto sin vínculo laboral fehaciente con el programa). La UEP era una estructura con dependencia del Ministerio de Hacienda y Finanzas de la Provincia, pero que remitía (por la naturaleza de los fondos sobre los que operaba) a las pautas evaluativas en cuanto a resultados e impacto que establece el Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, su organismo de financiamiento. Estaba constituida por dos equipos de trabajo muy bien diferenciados: el de “*coordinación*” y el “*de campo*”.

En el primero trabajábamos aquellos profesionales a cargo de cada una de las grandes áreas en las que estaba dividido el PRO.ME.BA: ambiental, legal, de obra, urbana, y social, y la coordinación ejecutiva del programa. Nos repartíamos los escritorios/recovecos, dispuestos con alguna lógica que evidentemente estaba inscripta en la historia del equipo UEP: la recepción, oficina de Coordinación, el área legal y el sector administrativo estaban en el mismo piso. El resto de los integrantes del equipo de coordinación, teníamos reservado un entrepiso que se alcanzaba luego de aventurarse sobre otra larga y enclenque escalera, esta vez de madera.

27 Como indiqué más arriba, las siglas UEP aluden a las Unidades Ejecutoras Provinciales

28 El campo social, concretamente el académico, se incorpora, se introyecta en los sujetos y se expresa con fuerza en frases como las de este tipo. Este concepto, desarrollado por Bourdieu, da cuenta del espacio social de acción, de influencias y también de disputas, que refleja relaciones objetivas entre agentes con distintas relaciones de fuerza derivadas del dominio de formas o capitales específicos, y que implican asimismo una posición en el mismo (Gutiérrez, 1995).

29 La solicitud por parte de la autoridad académica encarnada en Maite, y la autoridad administrativa representada por el Coordinador de la UEP, fue encarar el trabajo del “*área social*” de PRO.ME.BA, desde una perspectiva metodológica que “*promoviera la participación*”, en un claro alineamiento con las metodologías de PPGA que estaban siendo implementadas en un proyecto de escala ciudad enclavado en el área de intervención del PUI, y del cual PRO.ME.BA también participaba como un actor más de la Gestión Asociada.

30 La convocatoria a la academia (o la llegada de la misma traducida en el Programa “*Construyendo Cultura*”) se dio entre el 2016 y 2017, años posteriores a las gestiones nacionales del gobierno de Néstor Kirchner y Cristina Fernández. La imagen del asistencialismo, consagrada en el sentido común como “*la forma de hacer del peronismo*” pretendía ser “*superada*” por una visión meritocrática del desarrollo social, promovida por la gestión del entonces presidente Mauricio Macri. De allí que las propuestas en cuanto al tratamiento de lo social definidas en los marcos del financiamiento del BID se constituyeran en “*adecuadas*” para la agenda política provincial (en sintonía con la nacional).

31 “*En casa de herrero, cuchillo de palo*” es un refrán popular en Argentina, que alude a la situación paradójica que se da cuando quien o quienes disponen de una determinada habilidad, no la ponen en juego para sí mismos.

Quienes llegaban más temprano y se iban últimos eran los administrativos, personal que formaba parte de la planta permanente de la provincia y por lo tanto cumplían horarios y debían registrar su asistencia a través del sistema de huella digital. Los profesionales responsables de áreas íbamos llegando, según las agendas y necesidades “del campo”, un poco después de las 8 de la mañana.

“¿Te vas para el barrio?”

Era una frase habitual entre quienes distribuíamos nuestra jornada de trabajo entre la UEP y la “oficina de campo”, instalada en el mismo corazón de “El Pote”. Además de la búsqueda de transporte y compartir un viaje de aproximadamente quince minutos entre el centro de la ciudad y la periferia en la cual se encontraba “el barrio”, resumía en gran medida la percepción imperante entre los integrantes del PROMEBA de que aquello que sucedía en “el campo” era algo homogéneo, o por lo menos un conjunto de cosas específicas delimitadas por objetivos trazados e identificables. Irse “para el barrio” significa ir a encontrarse en y con el lugar en donde las cosas sucedían.

El PRO.ME.BA. había “bajado”<sup>32</sup> a la provincia de Río Revuelto en el año 2009, desarrollando hasta la actualidad más de una veintena de proyectos<sup>33</sup>. En el año 2017 los activos estaban emplazados en dos localidades del interior y en la capital. Sin embargo, por la dimensión de los objetivos propuestos, el PUI “El Pote” era el buque insignia del programa. Su área de intervención (una terminología que luego implicó no solo una limitación de índole territorial) implicaba casi cien hectáreas.

“El Pote” era, efectivamente una depresión inundable, un sector de lagunas y bañados al Sur de la ciudad, lindante con la Estación Terminal de Ómnibus, en la ciudad Capital de la provincia. Como todo accidente geográfico, especialmente los del tipo hídrico, sus límites eran dinámicos, dependiendo fuertemente del régimen de lluvias. En épocas de sequía, gran parte de aquellas lagunas significaban terrenos pasibles de ser tomados, lo cual implicó una creciente ampliación de las familias asentadas en la zona y por lo tanto un redimensionamiento de las barriadas que moraban en el “área de intervención”. En resumen, ese “pote” que se inundaba cada dos por tres era sólo una parte de las casi cien manzanas a cargo del programa. Los barrios intervenidos tenían otros nombres, otros significados, otras historias e identidades que distaban con ese apelativo tan gráfico a lo “hundido”: el barrio Torcaza, el barrio Ochoa, el San Pedro, el Totorá y el Pote propiamente dicho, este último justamente por su juventud, el único que los vecinos denominaban “asentamiento”<sup>34</sup>. No obstante, una característica aglutinaba a los cinco: décadas de ausencia estatal habían provocado en aquel de sector de la ciudad, una dinámica habitacional sin planificación y por lo tanto sujeta a las pautas (necesidades) de las familias y no del crecimiento urbanístico. Junto con ello, la pobreza, fuerte y central en la vida de los habitantes del “barrio”.

El equipo del programa estaba fácticamente dividido entre el abordaje de lo “duro”, representado por la infraestructura y la obra, y “lo social”, a cargo de nuestra área. Aquellos profesionales que tenían la capacidad de absorber porosidades entre ambos “mundos” eran mirados de reojo, casi con sospecha por gran parte del equipo de campo. Pasaba esto especialmente con los provenientes de disciplinas ingenieriles. Una de ellas era Candelaria, una ingeniera joven y decidida que estaba en el programa desde los inicios. Conocía los vericuetos legales y técnicos para poder llevar adelante casi cualquier iniciativa en el marco de los proyectos, y “El Pote”

32 En los intercambios con gestores y trabajadores del programa, funcionarios políticos y los mismos vecinos y vecinas, el término “bajar” estaba permanentemente presente.

33 <https://www.promeba.gob.ar/proyectos>

34 Julieta Quirós (2006, p. 51), en Cruzando la Sarmiento sostiene que “la diferencia entre barrio y asentamiento es de carácter temporal. Los hoy llamados barrios comenzaron como asentamientos, es decir como tomas de terrenos (...) loteados por los propios ocupantes”.

era su especialidad. Poseía la cualidad de poder establecer diálogo con los más diversos perfiles: desde la vecina que venía con problemas de líquidos cloacales en su casa, al funcionario del BID que visitaba cada dos años el proyecto para su evaluación. Esta característica le permitía tanto coordinar la dimensión técnica, como constituirse en un “puente” entre el área social y las demás, traccionando y operando como intérprete de las necesidades derivadas del avance de obra. Sin embargo, esta cualidad le generaba importantes problemas con aquellos miembros del equipo UEP con lecturas más “tradicionales” en torno al abordaje social. Una de ellas era Violeta, la jefa del área legal, quien – socializada en visiones rentísticas del programa y aprendizajes patrimonialistas derivados de su larga trayectoria en la administración pública de la Provincia – socavaba las propuestas generadas desde el equipo “renovador”.

Pero ¿cuáles eran estas visiones en disputa? ¿quiénes interpretaban lecturas diferentes? ¿desde qué elementos se generaban? ¿cuáles eran las expresiones concretas de esta tensión?

## Las Sociales

En la oficina de campo el trabajo iniciaba muy temprano para las chicas del área social. Esta feminización de la actividad “social” viene atada al históricamente condicionado estereotipo que pesa sobre las mujeres y las labores de cuidado, interpretándose que por pertenecer al género poseeríamos mayores competencias para la comunicación, el entendimiento, la mediación y/o el intercambio.

El equipo que trabajaba en el barrio estaba constituido por una trabajadora social, una comunicadora social y una técnica en gestión cultural. Esta constitución formaba parte de la “novedad”: hasta antes de la llegada de la “academia” (encarnada en Maite y en mi) todo el equipo era conformado por asistentes sociales<sup>35</sup>. Nadia, Alina y Graciela poseían perfiles hasta el momento desconocidos, tanto para el equipo como para los mismos vecinos<sup>36</sup>. Los primeros sabían que las sociales eran las encargadas de desactivar conflictos para habilitar el avance de la obra, mientras que los segundos sabían que las sociales debían resolverle sus problemas más urgentes, generalmente relacionados a tensiones y/o disputas entre vecinos, necesidades básicas de corte asistencial (colchones, medicamentos o pedidos ante Desarrollo Social), y la realización de gestiones varias en distintas reparticiones estatales (ANSES<sup>37</sup>, Municipio, Comisaría, CAPS<sup>38</sup>, el mismo PRO.ME.BA, entre otras). ¿Era posible movilizar esos aprendizajes enclavados en el programa y en el territorio con tanta fuerza? ¿con qué herramientas contábamos para inscribirnos en la política gubernamental de manera eficaz sin forzar procesos y desconocer saberes, en la búsqueda de impulsar espacios de intercambio ciudadano más horizontales?

Las intervenciones socioambientales y la atención a demanda en la oficina de campo se llevaban gran parte de la mañana de las consultoras sociales. Esto significaba que, si llegaba Don Narvée a reclamar que el pluvial de su vecina desaguaba en su patio, Nadia o Alina primero debían calmarlo (cuestión que podía tornarse difícil dados los ánimos generalmente caldeados ante este tipo de circunstancias), luego explicarle que esa conexión era temporal en razón del avance del frente de obra, relatarle los cambios que acarrearía la nueva conexión pluvial, tomar el reclamo y gestionar en el marco del equipo de campo que un integrante del mismo vaya a visitar el lugar para constatar y solucionar la cuestión. Otra cuestión vinculada a esto, y que significaba la intervención de las sociales, era la constante petición por parte de los técnicos de obra del acompañamiento de las mismas, dado que ellos consideraban “no contar con la facilidad para hablar con la gente que tienen

35 La profesión de asistentes o trabajadores sociales aborda la resolución y desarrollo de relaciones humanas, a fin de propulsar el cambio social y una mejor calidad de vida. No obstante, esta construcción es relativamente moderna, ya que la “asistencia social” en Argentina ancla sus raíces en la beneficencia y el asistencialismo desde una visión paliativa de la cuestión social (Alayón, 1992).

36 En los requerimientos del BID se alude a “Consultores Sociales” sin especificar la profesión y mucho menos el género. La selección de los consultores responde a la percepción que el/la responsable del área y la coordinación ejecutiva sostengan sobre las necesidades del proyecto en cuestión.

37 Administración Nacional de Seguridad Social.

38 Centro de Atención Primaria de la Salud.

ustedes”. En sus discursos además emergía con bastante asiduidad la condena hacia los vecinos del barrio, destacando particularidades negativas y/o despectivas en relación a sus costumbres y condiciones de vida.

Esta distancia entre las formas de concebir el abordaje de la cuestión social que pretendíamos construir desde la gestión del área social, se vio fuertemente interpelada por los saberes que el resto del equipo de campo sostenía al respecto. Fueron casi diez años “haciendo las cosas así, y siempre funcionaron”, decía uno de los arquitectos. “Hay que aprender a lidiar con estos”, decía un capataz y las “chicas sociales” levantaban las cejas en gesto de asombro. No había reparos en señalar que esta “forma renovadora” de entender la vida social en el barrio no era la correcta, adecuada o acostumbrada. Incluso tampoco había miramientos en facilitar “lecciones” por parte de los integrantes del equipo de campo más antiguos. Estos momentos de socialización laboral eran lo que en el lenguaje corriente se suele denominar “pagar derechos de piso”: desde dejarte “a pata” en el medio de la villa y acelerar el vehículo oficial para que no alcances a subir (y volver caminando), a mantener el baño de la oficina de campo sucio, sin papel higiénico y chorreado de orines, porque “acá estamos acostumbrados, somos todos tipos”. Finalmente son condiciones laborales precarias, peligrosas en términos de los riesgos físicos y psicosociales a los cuales estaban (estábamos) expuestas.

Las otras actividades en las cuales las consultoras sociales estaban involucradas, y que respondían a los lineamientos establecidos desde la coordinación UEP del área social, se relacionaban a la promoción y acompañamiento de reuniones participativas, con el objetivo de que los vecinos pudieran involucrarse en las decisiones en torno a las actividades que afectaban la vida del barrio. Entre ellas se contaban mesas de gestión, talleres de diagnóstico, interpretación y elaboración de proyectos vecinales conjuntos, espacios formales de planificación participativa y gestión asociada, todos ellos apuntados a diseñar y fortalecer la concreción de acciones en torno a lo deportivo, lo cultural, lo educativo, lo laboral, entre otras dimensiones de la integralidad del proceso de urbanización. Integralidad que era puesta en discusión debido a la ausencia del resto de las áreas en estas actividades: sólo las “sociales” traccionaban y participaban de estas propuestas. Aquí radicaba otro de los elementos que distanciaba al equipo y ponía a prueba la legitimidad de estas propuestas ante los vecinos.

Además, esto acarrea una importante sobrecarga laboral en las trabajadoras del área social, dado que, por la intensidad de la demanda en el turno de la mañana, postergaban las acciones sobre los objetivos de promoción y participación. Esto comprometía la planificación del área, y la matriz misma desde donde se entendía la cuestión social en el PUI “El Pote”. Debido a que eran “consultoras sociales”, esta figura implicaba su inserción al programa bajo la modalidad de “prestación de servicios<sup>39</sup>”, y por lo tanto no existía vínculo laboral registrado que permitiera al programa exigir la cumplimentación de una X cantidad de horas de trabajo para cumplimentar la densidad de las labores planificadas. La figura del prestador de servicios, monotributista, autónomo, o “*facturero*”, es una de las tantas modalidades desde las cuales el mismo Estado precariza la registración laboral.

Ante la imposibilidad de gestionar de manera adecuada la intensidad de tareas del área social, junto con Maite debíamos aguzar la creatividad: utilizábamos una reunión de frente de obra (generalmente utilizada para informar el avance de determinada cuestión infraestructural), para ensayar espacios de participación, relevar inquietudes y demandas que pudieran traducirse en proyectos participativos, y relevar saberes, competencias y predisposición para la colaboración con el programa. Y también, para no sobrecargar a las consultoras (quienes debían cumplir con otros compromisos laborales para sostenerse salarialmente), éramos nosotras quienes nos involucrábamos en las cuestiones más operativas de muchas de las actividades de promoción de la participación. De esta manera la sobrecarga era “compartida”, cuando no trasladada del equipo social de campo al equipo social UEP.

39 Según la Administración Federal de Ingresos Públicos (AFIP) “se considera prestación de servicios a cualquier locación y prestación realizada en el país a título oneroso y sin relación de dependencia, cuya utilización o explotación efectiva se lleve a cabo en el exterior, entendiéndose por tal a la utilización inmediata o al primer acto de disposición por parte del prestatario”.

[https://servicioscf.afip.gob.ar/publico/abc/ABCpaso2.aspx?id\\_nivel1=556&id\\_nivel2=892&id\\_nivel3=2587](https://servicioscf.afip.gob.ar/publico/abc/ABCpaso2.aspx?id_nivel1=556&id_nivel2=892&id_nivel3=2587)



En esta estrategia de sostenimiento de las inadecuadas condiciones laborales, desde nuestro rol de gestión del equipo, asumíamos este plus de tareas sin reconocer que lo hacíamos por una especie de “compromiso” o “involucramiento” con la naturaleza de los proyectos sociales en marcha<sup>40</sup>. Mi situación, incluso como responsable del área, también era la de una trabajadora precarizada, dado que presentaba una facturación mensual por mis labores. Sin embargo, mediaba un interés que iba “más allá” de la remuneración: la pulsión por colaborar en la concreción de los proyectos, en tanto incidencia y/o puesta en juego de los capitales construidos a lo largo de mi formación como académica.

En este sentido, cabe destacar las derivas que asumió uno de los proyectos del área social, relativo a la dimensión económica y de empleabilidad. El proyecto “Mujeres que emprenden” tenía como objetivo habilitar oportunidades laborales auto gestionadas, con el acompañamiento técnico<sup>41</sup> de PRO.ME.BA.. Desde ofrecer sus productos de elaboración individual en ferias, producir conjuntamente un servicio de catering institucional, u ofertar bandejas personalizadas para días festivos (Día del Padre, Día del Amigo), las iniciativas surgían por propuesta del Área Social., en atención a la necesidad concreta y expresa por parte de las mujeres de “aportar dinero” a sus hogares<sup>42</sup>. La formalización del proyecto nunca llegó a efectivizarse ni plasmarse en ningún tipo de instrumento institucional. Aún así, el proyecto funcionaba: las mujeres concurrían a los espacios de producción (y principalmente de encuentro), y empezaban a adquirir visibilidad en el barrio y en las ferias del circuito comercial de Río Revuelto. Sin embargo, no lo hacían en sus términos: la intervención del área Social era de índole tutelar, promoviendo una participación restrictiva, reducida a la elaboración del producto en cuestión<sup>43</sup>, mientras que el resto del circuito (de agregado de valor, y de comercialización) era establecido según el criterio derivado de mi propia trayectoria formativa. Por lo tanto, en la pulsión por la obtención de los objetivos de la intervención, “arrebataba<sup>44</sup>” las temporalidades inmersas en sus propios procesos productivos a fin de cumplir con los tiempos de la gestión. Asimismo, y desde mi matriz académica (en tanto la posesión de saberes vinculados a la gestión del Trabajo y del empleo), operaba acotando el potencial de las dimensiones valorativas que aquellas mujeres construían en torno a sus actividades laborales (lo que ellas creían, sabían, entendían, acerca de la actividad asumida, incluso la comercialización y la producción de redes), y que finalmente hubieran dotado de legitimidad al proyecto y facilitado su proyección en el tiempo<sup>45</sup>.

## Las épocas de campaña

En este marco de restricciones y reacomodamientos, los proyectos impulsados desde el área social iban tomando forma y visibilidad. Aparecieron iniciativas culturales y deportivas, algunas otras enfocadas en la empleabilidad y que especialmente agrupaban mujeres, otras que acompañaban procesos de alfabetización de niños y niñas, otras (las más tensionantes) que recuperaban la palabra y horizontes de futuro para jóvenes con

40 Algunos de los proyectos que se promovieron desde el área social tuvieron que ver con emprendedurismo y género, juventudes y consumo problemático de sustancias, apoyo escolar, con iniciativas para la promoción de la empleabilidad, con deportes y recreación, entre otros.

41 La dimensión técnica aquí puede verse resignificada en razón de la construcción de cercanía relacional y hasta afectiva con las mujeres integrantes del proyecto. El tiempo compartido, la intensidad del involucramiento de todas ellas en la consecución de sus objetivos, los conflictos personales y familiares expuestos en el marco de las reuniones de trabajo, y las propias actividades inherentes a la producción de bienes y/o servicios (tejido a crochet, decoración en porcelana fría, repostería, peluquería, entre otras), implicaban un permanente diálogo con las integrantes de “Mujeres que emprenden”.

42 La dimensión económica de los barrios incluidos en el PI, arrojaba indicadores de inserción laboral formal muy débiles. La gran mayoría de las familias subsistía en base a trabajos informales, comúnmente denominados “changas”, (en la construcción, el servicio doméstico y el cuidado de niños y ancianos), y de las transferencias monetarias establecidas por el Estado Nacional, tales como la AUH (Asignación Universal por Hijo).

43 Paradigmática, y cargada de una fuerte reflexividad en relación a mi rol como gestora proveniente de la academia, fue la circunstancia en la cual pude observar cómo el remanente de bandejas de desayuno para el “día del Padre” (elaboradas en fibrofácil, pintadas a mano, cargadas con muffins, chipás, una taza y una coqueta tarjeta), eran ofrecidas en la vía pública, dispuestas sobre la vereda de tierra, en una esquina sin iluminación y expuestas al polvo de los camiones y vehículos que pasaban por el lugar.

44 En el lenguaje corriente, arrebatar es exponer al fuego máximo algún alimento que requeriría un tratamiento más suave para su cocción.

45 El proyecto “Mujeres que emprenden” permaneció vigente entre octubre de 2017 y agosto de 2018.

consumos problemáticos<sup>46</sup>. Como todo proceso, la construcción de estos espacios de participación comunitaria implicó un tiempo de reconocimiento por parte de los vecinos y vecinas del barrio hacia las integrantes del equipo social (y viceversa). Y, por consiguiente, también significó la reformulación (no sin tensiones) de los sentidos identificados en torno a “lo social” que habían sido aprendidos por la gente de “El Pote”.

La emergencia de nuevos proyectos acarrió una mayor demanda por parte del equipo social al resto del equipo de campo. El ejemplo más contundente fue el proyecto deportivo “Potreros<sup>47</sup>”, del cual habíamos partido con la identificación de un problema socioambiental: la existencia de un espacio de aproximadamente media hectárea, en donde los niños y niñas del barrio jugaban, las familias tomaban mate<sup>48</sup>, y en el cual algunos vecinos colaboraban extendiendo de lado a lado una red de volley y donaban su tiempo para enseñarles ese deporte a los más pequeños. Sin embargo, ese mismo espacio era apropiado por un grupo de jóvenes que, organizados junto a equipos de fútbol de otros barrios, organizaban campeonatos sin tener en cuenta el uso social del área. Detectada esta circunstancia, el equipo social además de proponer talleres de reconocimiento, producción y negociación de normas de convivencia<sup>49</sup>, generó una planificación que demandaba la ejecución de una obra de delimitación, saneamiento, iluminación y equipamiento comunitario para la futura “canchita”. Por lo tanto, el involucramiento de las áreas de obra, ambiental, legal y urbana era necesario para la concreción del proyecto. Estas iniciativas, si bien discursivamente y desde los equipos de coordinación UEP eran muy bienvenidas, eran consideradas “sobrecarga” para los ingenieros, arquitectos, capataces, de campo. Y se lo “hacían sentir” a las trabajadoras del área social, desplegando algunas de las estrategias vinculadas al “derecho de piso”, comentado más arriba.

El año 2017 resultó año de elecciones en Río Revuelto. Los proyectos en marcha se convirtieron por lo tanto en objeto de campaña, en tanto este es un uso habitual que los gobiernos dan a las acciones de gestión, a fin de impulsar sus objetivos electorales. Había que intentar “compatibilizar” los intereses políticos de la gestión, con los intereses del programa y especialmente de los proyectos del área social. Es decir: sumar un condicionamiento más al ya constreñido sistema de trabajo en el PRO.ME.BA. Pero no se trataba de un condicionamiento menor.

La época de campaña se caracterizaba por una algarabía generalizada entre quienes, además de ser trabajadores del Estado, también eran simpatizantes de la gestión de turno. Estar en campaña era “mostrarse” sin reparos, sin opacidades. Más allá de la situación laboral específica que cada quien transitara, si “tu partido” iba por la reelección, “te ponés la camiseta<sup>50</sup>”. ¿Qué sucedía con aquellos trabajadores y trabajadoras que no comulgaban con la gestión de turno (por no pertenecer al partido o directamente por considerarse no representado por ninguno de los partidos del sistema)? Había que adecuarse. Pero ¿cómo?

La campaña, que no sólo impactaba en la estructuración y organización de las acciones sino también en los integrantes de los equipos UEP y de campo, ponía en juego la trama de sostenimiento de los vínculos “laborales” establecidos. Como ya pudimos ver, tales vínculos se encontraban totalmente vulnerados: gran parte del equipo de campo era “facturero”, “prestador de servicios”, una figura inexistente para el derecho laboral, y específica del derecho comercial. Aunque había una cuestión a considerar previamente por parte de los trabajadores del PRO.ME.BA: el mantenimiento del programa y especialmente del equipo dependía en gran medida de que

46 En general los escenarios del barrio en los cuales se reunían estos jóvenes eran reconocidos negativamente por sus vecinos, lo cual se translucía en frases que contenían alguna mistura entre “drogadictos, vagos y chorros”.

47 En Argentina la palabra potrero remite a un espacio destinado a la práctica del fútbol barrial

48 El mate es una infusión muy popular en Argentina (especialmente en las provincias del Norte) y que convoca a la reunión dada su particular forma de tomarlo (un cuenco con bombilla que se carga con agua caliente y pasa de mano en mano).

49 Estos talleres eran momentos de gran tensión entre vecinos con diferentes intereses e interpretaciones sobre el uso del espacio público. El trabajo de las consultoras sociales y de las responsables UEP del área era difícil, especialmente por la exposición a diversas violencias, en las que debíamos operar como mediadoras.

50 En un acto muy específico, el uso de gorras, cintas y/o señales visibles de la adscripción partidaria, como por ejemplo remeras, se tornaba una práctica usual durante las épocas de campaña electoral. Sin embargo, esta práctica era llevada adelante, preferentemente, por los trabajadores de los estamentos más operativos del programa.

el partido permaneciera en el gobierno. Entonces, existía un estrecho vínculo entre el mantenimiento de la gestión que motorizaba esta política gubernamental y la posibilidad de ser re-contratado/a al año siguiente. Por lo tanto, si deseabas sostener tu fuente de trabajo, casi consecuentemente debías implicarte en la movilización de recursos que significaba la campaña electoral.

Esta implicación, que podría interpretarse como una cuestión interna, de posicionamiento ideológico y partidario que opera en el plano de la noción de política que sostengamos los sujetos, y que incluso se intentaba “compatibilizar” en aras del sostenimiento de los empleos, era puesta en situación de múltiples formas, generalmente sutiles, aunque bien eficaces como lo he expuesto. Sin embargo, convivía con demandas en donde toda la carga de violencia institucional se concretizaba de manera muy vívida. “Hay que salir a hacer campaña”, fue el expreso pedido de la conducción del Ministerio de donde dependía la UEP. La convocatoria fue contundente: el ministro reunió a todo el equipo, desde su coordinador ejecutivo hasta el último sobrestante, para solicitar en tono amenazante “que salgan de las oficinas, todos a la calle”. El encuentro, que significó que el equipo de campo y el equipo UEP “subieran” a la oficina del ministro (y por lo tanto suspender las actividades de toda una mañana en el PUI) no duró más de dos minutos.

## **A modo de cierre**

Interrogando(me) (en) la función pública: una labor con pocas certezas

Luego de casi diez años de abordar el empleo público en la provincia de Río Revuelto, de observarlo y analizarlo como un objeto de estudio científico, de repente me vi embarcada en la turbulencia de las contradicciones que modelizaban al Estado y a sus relaciones laborales. La presión por realizar una tarea que iba contra mi propia construcción acerca de lo político y la política, que estaba en las antípodas de mis interpretaciones en tanto el aparato Estatal como productor de política gubernamental, y que además discutía con mis formas de entender la construcción de autoridad (devenida de mi experiencia como académica), conmovió los sentidos desde donde entendía mi problema de investigación.

“¡Ahora sí Valentina! Ahora sí vamos a ver cómo hacés campaña!”, fueron las palabras de Violeta, la compañera responsable del área legal, quien agitando unos papeles de manera exultante y enérgica, me abordó desde la puerta de acceso de la oficina de campo. Su gesto condensaba casi un desafío: ¿cómo resolverían las académicas, las “extrañas”, esta situación eminentemente política? La calle, como espacio de disputa partidaria, de captación de voluntades – pero también como lugar de expresión, de encarnación de la política gubernamental en sujetos con trayectorias ideológicas, formativas, laborales, sociales, tan distintas y asimismo amalgamados por un trabajo que nos precarizaba desde múltiples dimensiones – no era ajena a la concepción “renovadora” del área social: la calle era el espacio del intercambio, y los sentidos embarcados en ello se reeditaban permanentemente, en una negociación iterativa que pretendíamos (proponíamos) participativa, horizontal y potencialmente emancipadora. ¿Había posibilidad de diálogo entre ambas esferas?

Entiendo que sí. El diálogo era la única moneda de cambio para continuar traccionando procesos participativos, o por lo menos con tal pretensión. El trabajo del área social, especialmente de quienes gestionábamos el área, que se declamaba y presumía estratégico desde las definiciones que articulaba esta política de urbanización, operaba desde los “intersticios del sistema”, en la incomodidad de una concepción de la cuestión social que nunca terminó de decantar en el resto del equipo, especialmente del equipo de campo. Los vecinos y vecinas del barrio continuarían siendo vistos como destinatarios, aún ante los intentos por incorporar iniciativas que favorecieran la politización de los espacios barriales, y de allí mayor participación y compromiso de los habitantes de “El Pote”.

En el nivel de las prácticas, el uso electoral de la gestión y la política gubernamental, entendido en gran parte de la evidencia teórica como un efecto vinculado a pautas de relación pre-modernas, resulta una cuestión casi indisociable de la gestión de los asuntos públicos. El calendario electoral argentino determina que cada dos años existirán elecciones (de medio término y generales), en las cuales los resultados de las políticas gubernamentales implementadas se verán evaluados por la ciudadanía. Podría decir que trabajadores y trabajadoras han incorporado el calendario electoral y las tensiones derivadas de su tránsito, en una lectura que implicará sostener sus fuentes de trabajo durante estos períodos, a partir de la puesta en juego de decisiones y estrategias, mayormente individuales<sup>51</sup>, del plano de lo político y de lo técnico, en una relación de interpenetración permanente entre ambas esferas. No existiría entonces tal dicotomía, tensión y/o necesidad de posicionamiento entre lo político y lo técnico, más que en las construcciones teórico-conceptuales elaboradas por quienes transitamos otros campos. Fue en el proceso concreto y vívido de gestionar parte de una política gubernamental cargando el atavío académico (y sin resignarlo), donde recuperé aquella noción propuesta por Mabel Thwaites Rey (2001), respecto de que lo político y lo técnico constituyen dimensiones porosas de la acción pública, inescindibles, imprescindibles, en tanto caras de una misma moneda.

En este intento de etnografiar cómo la función académica se ve interpelada desde la gestión<sup>52</sup>, expuse las implicancias de decidir en territorio y en el marco de urgencias, de tomar alternativas (quizás en un número reducidísimo), de operar creativamente, de hacer carne las geografías, amigarse y pelearse con los actores, conocer y perderse en los caminos del barrio, hacer cuerpo la política gubernamental, y asumirnos como académicos y gestores, sujetos en permanente discusión.

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51 Además de la adhesión (más o menos intensa) a los lineamientos de gestión durante las etapas electorales, los trabajadores estatales bajo alguna de las dimensiones de la precariedad reseñadas en la cita número 28, despliegan estrategias en búsqueda de alternativas ante escenarios que impliquen la degradación de su situación laboral actual. Entre ellas se cuentan la búsqueda de “adscripciones” o “comisiones de servicio” en otros organismos estatales más afines a su posicionamiento político-ideológico, y en donde el apelativo a redes de cercanía y/o reciprocidad es fundamental, la consulta permanente y sistemática del destino posible de sus expedientes de designación (cuestión que puede constituirse en “el tema central” durante los meses previos a la finalización de una gestión y que genera climas laborales altamente nocivos), la suspensión/moderación de sus labores, en pos del mantenimiento de otros empleos más “seguros”.

52 “nós mesmos, quando atuando no campo das ações sobre as culturas (mas não só, de fato), fazemos, e nos fazemos, Estado, seja como produtores de conhecimentos e/ou ideologias, seja no exercício executivo de processos de intervenção. É preciso refletir também sobre a natureza e historicidade desse vínculo em cada espaço social de articulação de ações de governo e ações de seus supostos destinatários, as formas pelas quais estes as reconfiguram, a elas resistem ou aderem. Neste terreno, nós nunca deixaremos de ser ‘antropólogos aplicados’, já que nossa produção pode ser muitas vezes imediatamente consumida. A vigilância epistemológica deixa de ser um imperativo do método para se deslocar ao mundo ético e moral” (Sousa Lima y Macedo e Castro, 2015, p. 40).

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# Ethnographic Encounters: Using Ethnography to Study Brazil's Participatory Governance Institutions

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## Abstract

This article explores the contributions that ethnography and ethnographers can make to understanding governance institutions. Told through the story of a collaborative research project on participatory health governance in the municipality of Cabo de Santo Agostinho in north-east Brazil, we explore how the principles of ethnographic research intersected with other principles: of collaborative enquiry, participatory research and a methodological ethics grounded in the reversal of the conventional relationship between researcher and researched. Picking up on some of the core defining features of ethnography as a methodology, we examine how these came to inform our understanding of the dynamics of politics, power, and participation. In doing so, we reflect on how it is the pliable and improvisational nature of ethnography in practice that contrasts most substantially with the conventional tools of the political scientist and that makes ethnographic encounters so rich and valuable for the study of political institutions.

**Key words:** Participatory Democracy; Participatory Governance; *Conselhos de Saúde*; Citizenship; Health Governance.

# Encontros etnográficos: utilizando a etnografia para estudar as instituições de governança participativa do Brasil

## Resumo

Este artigo explora a contribuição que a etnografia e os etnógrafos podem dar para a melhor compreensão das instituições de governança. Através da história de um projeto de pesquisa sobre governança participativa em saúde no município de Cabo de Santo Agostinho (PE), exploramos como os princípios da pesquisa etnográfica se relacionam com outros princípios: de investigação colaborativa, de pesquisa participativa e de uma ética metodológica fundamentada na inversão da relação convencional entre pesquisador e pesquisado. Tomando como metodologia algumas das principais características que definem a etnografia, o artigo examina como elas vieram a informar nossa compreensão da dinâmica da política, do poder e da participação. Ao fazê-lo, refletimos sobre a natureza flexível e, em parte, improvisada da etnografia na prática que contrasta fortemente com as ferramentas convencionais do cientista político e que torna os encontros etnográficos ricos e valiosos para o estudo das instituições políticas.

**Palavras-chave:** Democracia Participativa; Governança Participativa; Conselhos de Saúde; Cidadania; Governança da Saúde.



# Ethnographic Encounters: Using Ethnography to Study Brazil's Participatory Governance Institutions

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## Introduction

It is only relatively recently that political scientists have begun to recognise the usefulness of ethnography to the study of politics (Auyero, 2006). Over the last decade, there has been growing interest in its possibilities. This article seeks to contribute to the rapidly expanding literature on the ethnography of political institutions (Crewe, 2021). In it, we tell the story of using ethnography as part of a collaborative research project on one of Brazil's many thousands of participatory sectoral councils, the *Conselho Municipal de Saúde* (CMS) in the municipality of Cabo de Santo Agostinho in the north-eastern state of Pernambuco. The project was part of an innovative research programme called *Olhar Crítico* ('A Critical Look') that convened social movement activists, non-governmental organisations and scholars of anthropology, political economy and political science to take a critical look at practices of citizenship and participation in Brazil.<sup>1</sup>

Our contribution to *Olhar Crítico* began as an unconventional collaborative enquiry in which ethnography played a relatively minor background role. Gripped by the unfolding story, Andrea, the ethnographer amongst us, continued the process of critical enquiry through episodic fieldwork visits to Cabo. With this, the project came to revolve largely around the application of the traditional tools of the ethnographic researcher: participant and direct observation. Yet the original framing of the project, the social movement-led collaboration with which it began and the continued engagement that became part of the dynamic of the research as it evolved, were all decisively different from a conventional anthropological research project. Narrating the biography of the project as it unfolded over the years, we examine what an ethnographic approach can offer in understanding political institutions. We suggest, in conclusion, that it is the pliable and improvisational nature of ethnography and its attentiveness to what Auyero (2007) has called 'the grey zone' of politics that contrasts most substantially with the conventional tools of the political scientist and that makes ethnographic encounters so rich and valuable for the study of political institutions.

## Ethnographies of Democracy

When this project began in the early 2000s, there was little literature on the use of ethnography in studies of political institutions to inspire us. Writing in 2006, Javier Auyero describes a 'double absence: of politics in ethnographic literature and of ethnography in studies of politics' (2006: 258). Anthropologists preferred to 'study down' than to 'study up'. Political Science was dominated by a positivistic mindset that cast aspersions on ethnography as 'impressionistic' and lacking 'rigour'. And yet there was also growing recognition of the limitations of the conventional toolkit of the political scientist. As Auyero observes:

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<sup>1</sup> The project was funded by the British Government's Department for International Development, led by ActionAid Brazil and resulted in a number of collective publications, including Athias, Antunes and Romano (2007), Romano, Andrade and Antunes (2007), Cordeiro, Cornwall and Delgado (2007) and Cornwall, Cordeiro and Delgado (2006).

... the pace of political action, the texture of political life, and the plight of political actors have all been cast into the shadows created by the unnecessary and deleterious over-reliance on quantitative methods in both political science and political sociology (2006: 258).

By the time the 2000s drew to a close, there was a veritable flowering of ethnographies of politics. The merits of an ethnographic approach to the study of political institutions – understood here in the narrow sense of the term as structures in which binding decisions are made that concern the administration of government, as well as their rituals, rules and practices – had become evident (Wedeen, 2010; Crewe, 2021).

What ethnography contributes to the study of political institutions, above all, is to bring them to life. Ethnographic writing tells stories. Ethnographers show characters grappling with power, privilege, convention and contestation. These stories enable us to hear unheard voices and get a sense of the ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott, 1990) as characters move in and out of formal political arenas. In her 2010 survey of the emerging literature, Lisa Wedeen highlights one of the most valuable aspects of an ethnographic approach, arguing that ‘ethnography adds value to political analyses in part by providing insight into actors’ lived experiences’ (2010: 61). It helps us understand motivations and get a sense of actor-networks (Latour, 2005) spanning formal and informal political spaces and the ‘discourse coalitions’ (Hajer, 1995) that form within and connect them. Fu and Simmons refer to ethnography as ‘one particularly crucial methodological tool in the study of contention’ (2021: 1695) and suggest that

By providing a fuller appreciation of the “what”—uncovering hidden processes, exploring social meanings, and giving voice to unheard stories—ethnography and “ethnography-plus” approaches not only help us to appreciate the “what” but help us answer the “how” and the “why” (2021: 1697).

Annavarapu and Levenson describe ethnography as ‘a method uniquely positioned to make sense of people’s lifeworlds, worldviews, and political logics’ (2021: 343). Asking people to speak about their experience, narrate examples and explore their understandings of what is going on can offer insights that can be difficult to gain from methods such as formal, structured surveys. Interviews with political actors offer the researcher only a partial picture. They can be one-sided, selectively remembered, glimpses from the perspective of people whose positionality influences what they notice, remember and recount. Survey methods share this attribute, even as quantitative political scientists use the numbers they are able to generate in this way as fact.

Teixeira, Crunivel and Fernandes highlight the challenges of access to politicians and observe what they describe as the ‘recurrent opacity of political life’ (2020: 547), noting that the worlds of politics are ones ‘where lies and omissions are part of the game’ (ibid). The ethnography of the everyday lives of political institutions brings the dynamism of these institutions to life, in all their messy complexity. Luhtakallio and Eliasoph (2017: 749) speak of ‘ethnography’s capacity to open windows that traditional analysis of political institutions leaves shut’. Through these windows, to continue the metaphor, researchers can peer into the lives of institutions as lived, with all the ‘details and effects of different forms of political action, networks and tactics,’ as Auyero and Joseph (2007: 3) put it. ‘After all,’ Auyero observes,

ethnography is uniquely equipped to look microscopically at the foundations of political institutions and their attendant sets of practices, just as it is ideally suited to explain why political actors behave the way they do and to identify the causes, processes, and outcomes that are part and parcel of political life (2006: 258).

Ethnography is described in this literature as ‘particularly crucial’, ‘uniquely positioned’ and ‘uniquely equipped’ for the study of politics. This begs the question: what is ethnography? It is worth establishing that there is no single commonly understood definition of ethnography (Forsey, 2010). Some researchers set boundaries with other forms of social research much more strictly than others. For some, ethnography consists of the application of a particular method, participant observation. This involves the ethnographer becoming

part of the lifeworld they are studying to such an extent that they are able to understand how it works from the perspective of a participant. This is a form of understanding referred to as 'emic' (from within) versus 'etic' (from outside), from a distinction originally drawn by linguist Kenneth Pike in the 1950s. For others, ethnography involves a rich mix of methods that go beyond participant observation, as described in Pelto and Pelto's classic 1978 anthropological methods manual, including: semi-structured, unstructured and key informant interviews; group discussions; direct and participant observation; visualisation methods borrowed from psychology; and even the use of surveys to establish how widely certain practices or beliefs are found.

It is, however, not just a matter of method. In a compelling account of what the ethnographic research process involves, the sociologist Loïc Wacquant distinguishes ethnography from other forms of social research by focusing on *proximity*, describing it as

... social research based on the close-up, on-the-ground observation of people and institutions in real time and space, in which the investigator embeds herself near (or within) the phenomenon so as to detect how and why agents on the scene act, think and feel the way they do (Wacquant, 2003: 5).

Schatz (2013) identifies another distinguishing feature: it is the opportunity ethnography presents for *immersion*, he argues, that makes it such a powerful method for getting under the skin of institutions and for understanding the biographies and social lives of these spaces. What makes an ethnographic approach so valuable for the study of political institutions is not only that it can get close up and personal. It is also that ethnography enables us to understand better the subterranean workings of power through the shaping of discourse and forms of exclusion in these political spaces. In doing so, it allows researchers to get something of an *insider's view* into the institutions they are studying. In another more recent review article that captures the rise and uses of political ethnography, Benzecry and Baiocchi (2017) note another key quality to ethnography: a richness of *detail* that can provide vital clues into how political institutions actually work.

Where previous studies of politics used broad strokes to paint a picture of political life, political ethnography allows the researcher to bring up the mundane details that can affect politics, providing a 'thick description' where one was missing (2017: 232).

A further set of defining features positions ethnography as an emergent, pliable, and adaptable practice through which the researcher evolves an approach that best fits the context, rather than a rigid, narrowly defined enactment of strict rules and restrictive methodological rituals. Timothy Pachirat neatly captures these attributes of the ethnographic process, emphasising the unruly elements of the ethnographer's craft.

Ethnography as a method is particularly unruly, particularly undisciplined, particularly celebratory of improvisation, bricolage, and serendipity, and particularly attuned to the possibilities of surprise, inversion, and subversion in ways that other methods simply are not (Cited in Wedeen, 2010: 256).

From these descriptions of ethnography, a set of family resemblances can be drawn. These stand in sharp contrast with the conventional methodological toolbox of the political researcher. Ethnography is a methodology that is adaptive to the researcher and the circumstances, flexible, informal, improvisational, emergent. It is also, as a number of the authors cited here allude to, a way to zoom in on what's really going on, getting a rich, detailed, picture. It works through immersion and proximity, with those who practice it seeking to see things from the point of view of those they are studying. For these reasons, ethnography relies on the ethnographer(s): they participate, they observe, they write up their fieldnotes, interpret their findings and corroborate them with others, interview, watch and hang out with people.

The very embeddedness of the method of the ethnographer in their own personality and persona has been one of the reasons for those of a more positivist bent to be suspicious about the validity – or, perhaps more accurately, pace Lincoln and Guba (1985), the *trustworthiness* - of ethnographic research. The centrality of the ethnographer to ethnographic research raises other questions about the use of ethnography in research on political processes and institutions. Does the ethnographer need to be trained in social research to practice ethnography, and if not, how does an ethnographer make their ways of working legible to people from disciplines where the collection of data is much more narrowly bound to the creation of artefacts such as the answers to questions, whether in questionnaire surveys or interviews? Much ethnographic research is effectively kept secret; it takes place in the observations, ‘headnotes’ (Sanjek, 1990) and fieldnotes of the ethnographer. How might the practice of ethnography be democratised, decentering the expert ethnographer? Is this possible? How does the ethnographer collaborate with others? How does ethnography work in co-creative, participatory research? Is ‘participatory ethnography’ an oxymoron or a rich field of possibility?

These are some of the questions this article explores. In what follows, we look at the contribution that ethnography and what we call ‘ethnographic encounters’ made to our shared understanding of the play of politics and power in the everyday life of Cabo’s CMS.

## Introducing Olhar Crítico

Led by the anthropologist Jorge Romano, then Director of Programmes at ActionAid Brasil and supported by imaginative DfID Social Development Adviser, Sue Fleming, also an anthropologist, the aim of Olhar Crítico was to learn from the unfolding experience of Brazil’s participatory governance institutions and from social movements engaged in creating, shaping, occupying and brokering intermediary spaces between citizens and the state. It drew together social movement actors, staff from international and local civil society organisations, distinguished Brazilian researchers from the disciplines of anthropology and political science, and a couple of international political anthropologists.

In early 2003, we found ourselves in the verdant environs of the Hotel Sete Colinas in Olinda at the inception workshop of the programme. Immediately, we came to recognise that this was to be an entirely different kind of way of doing research. The workshop brought together activists and practitioners representing some of Brazil’s most prominent social movements, including the movement that had come together to defend usufruct rights to the *babaçu* nut in the north-eastern state of Ceara, where aggressive commercialisation had violently driven the women and men who had traditionally harvested and processed this oil-rich fruit off the land, and the right to the city movement, who were mobilising neighbourhoods in Brazil’s many urban slums. In Gramscian terms, the process centred these ‘organic intellectuals’ and their immersive, experiential knowledge. Then there were academics, ‘traditional intellectuals’, who brought their theories, concepts and methodologies.

Turning the conventional relationship between researcher and researched inside out, the workshop took shape around a series of dialogues that centred the activists’ and practitioners’ experiential expertise. The researchers were invited into the centre of the circle to sit with a leader of a social movement and interview them, asking them questions about their vision for change; the dynamics of leadership and activism in the movement; forms of engagement with the state; campaigns, struggles and victories. The biographies of the movements told in this way were gripping. With their sharply honed questions and interviewing skills, the academics facilitated the activists and practitioners to tell their stories; they then reflected on what those stories might tell us about the politics of democratisation and the realisation of the promise of participation and inclusion.

The research process came to be shaped out of these stories. Four teams were formed, matching activist/practitioner with academics. Drawn to Silvia's story of the CMS in Cabo, Andrea and Nelson joined Silvia to form one of the teams. Silvia led a social movement organisation called *Centro das Mulheres do Cabo* (Cabo Women's Centre, CMC), which had been a partner of ActionAid Brasil for some years. Silvia herself was a veteran of the *movimento sanitaria*, the public health reform movement that led the struggle for a national health service that was free at the point of delivery and accessible to all. She'd joined the movement as a medical student, as social movements came together to mobilise for an end to military rule and a return to democracy in the 1980s. *Sanitaristas* – activists of the movement – had moved in the intervening years into the service of the state, practising medicine and influencing public health. Passionate about access to health services for all, *sanitaristas* were everywhere: inside and outside the health system, vital allies for the transformation of public health services and the realisation of the inclusive vision of the Brazilian national health service, the *Sistema Único de Saúde* (SUS). Some, like Silvia, went on to lead social movement and non-governmental organisations working in partnership with the state, but remaining sufficiently at a distance to play a role in holding it to account. Others entered the state, serving in the commissioning and regulation of local, regional and national health services. They were very present in these participatory governance spaces, acting for both the state and for civil society.

The 'Citizens' Constitution' of 1988 enshrined the dream of a national health system in which organised civil society and health service professionals themselves had a role in financial and policy oversight, which came to be referred to as *controle social*. A complex institutional architecture was put in place. Participatory conferences, *conferências de saúde*, were held at regular intervals at municipal, state and federal levels. Tens of thousands of representatives of civil society and the state across the country were convened to deliberate health policy. The creation of *conselhos de saúde*, participatory health councils, was mandated for each of Brazil's more than 5000 municipalities, 26 states and at the national level. The composition of the *conselhos* was specified as consisting of four segments. Half of the membership should be from civil society, elected from organised civil society groups registered with the state. A quarter should be health providers, including representatives of the private sector. And the final quarter should be health managers, including the Secretary of Health at municipal, state and federal level. Silvia's organisation CMC was one of the civil society actors in the municipality elected to the *conselho*. As the representative of this organisation, Silvia served on the *conselho* and from there, was elected as the *conselho's* President. She was one of the first civil society leaders to serve in this position nationally.

Nelson knew Jorge from working together at the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro. An economist by training, he'd got a broad expertise in rural development and interest in social movements. He was part of a network of academics brought into the project by Jorge, which included colleagues from universities across the country, anthropologists with expertise on local social movements and political scientists studying the emergence and consolidation of new political institutions given possibility by the 1988 Constitution. Andrea was part of Jorge's international network, a political anthropologist with an interest in the politics of institutionalised participation who had worked for ActionAid International and had done some work with ActionAid Brasil. With Alex Shankland, a colleague from the UK-based think-tank the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Andrea joined Olhar Crítico as an international counterpart researcher; their role was to link Brazilian experiences and experiments in democratisation with other global south contexts in which democratic innovation was taking shape.

Staying with the process that had begun in the workshop, our plan was for Silvia to re-tell the story and for us to press pause at different points, so that we could be directed by her to other sources and voices, guided by her questions. In this way, we would explore how political actors of different kinds viewed, used, and engaged with the CMS. Together, we'd reflect on and write about what we learnt in these encounters, using them to deepen our collective understanding of the way institutionalised participation played out in practice.

## Ethnographic Beginnings

Within a few weeks, we reconvened in Cabo. Silvia had prepared a mountain of documents, reports, papers, municipal government documents and training materials. We dipped into the material with her. In a conventional research project, this might have taken the form of us carting off the papers to work on ourselves. In this one, it involved interviewing her to find out about elements that struck her as significant, with her leading the enquiry. This enabled Silvia to point out things that we should take note of and to reflect on the correspondence or dissonance of what was in the documents with what she remembered from the meetings of the CMS or what was going on behind the scenes at the time. Through this, she helped to shape the questions that Nelson and I would go on to ask the people with whom she suggested we speak.

From there, we went on to conduct a series of interviews. The administrator of the CMS took the list of the *conselheira/os* that Silvia had written down on a piece of paper. She tracked them down one by one, scheduling meetings with them that gave us a run of days packed with meetings. We worked in the room where the CMS held its meetings, with its light green walls, plain wooden tables, dim light from a naked bulb and white plastic chairs. A hand-written poster with ground-rules for interactions in meetings hung on the wall. The administrator had seen it prudent to put it together, she told us, when one meeting had got a bit too feisty and people had begun shouting at each other. We learnt from Silvia that she had tried to expand civil society engagement by having a system in which two sets of representatives were elected: *titulares* (titleholders) and *suplentes* (substitutes), representing different organisations, who would stand in if titulares were not able to attend or were stood down. A system was in place where three counts of non-attendance would result in the titulares being replaced by their suplente. Only titulares could vote. But suplentes could and did attend meetings, along with members of the general public.

On that first visit, we spent a week in Cabo. Days full of interviews. Evenings spent in intense conversation reflecting on what we were learning. In all but one of the interviews, Nelson and Andrea went without Silvia. It was only in interviewing a high-level official in the municipal secretariat that Silvia felt her presence might help open a door and introduce a level of frankness into a conversation that could easily have become more superficial without her. Each day, we'd reflect together on where we'd got to and share emerging insights. Silvia would throw in some more questions to get us to investigate and some more people we might want to speak with. The pace was intense, the process iterative, the learning intensive. We quickly got much, much deeper into understanding the micro-politics of the CMS and the dynamics of institutionalised participation that could have been possible if either of the external researchers had landed up in Cabo to do their own research project. Our academic questions helped to frame reflections, offering theories that were useful to think with or as a foil for disagreement. But Silvia's insights took us to another level of analysis.

In a mere week of interviews, a researcher working alone would only hope to scratch the surface. By the end of the week, guided by Silvia in this way, we'd got a good handle on the story of how the CMS had come into being and how it was working. We'd heard from a wide variety of civil society and state actors. Silvia's social and political capital had brokered the possibility of extensive, illuminating, and frank conversations. We'd got a picture of the different phases of development, the interface with other governance institutions and the interplay between *conselho* and *conferência* in deliberations over policy and in the dynamics of accountability. We'd also tapped into some of the challenges – political, logistical, epistemic, procedural – faced by the participatory governance system in Cabo seen in microcosm in this way. Over the course of the week, we'd also introduced an innovation into the way the CMS meetings were minuted that would be significant further down the line. The administrator had watched how we'd used a small recording device to record the interviews. She commented that she could do with something like this to produce more accurate minutes, so Andrea gave her the recording device as a contribution to the development of the CMS.

But we hadn't had the opportunity to do what ethnographers do: bear witness through participant observation. We hadn't seen the CMS at work.

A month or so later, Nelson and Andrea returned to Cabo for a workshop that brought the *conselheira/os* together. Using a participatory methodology, Silvia facilitated an interactive timeline that re-told the story of the formation of the CMS and then put people into small groups to consider the challenges identified in our research. Our principal focus was on how the CMS put into actual practice the principles of *controle social* in a context where accountability of the state to citizens had been so lacking in the past. Part of the institutional design of this form of participatory governance was that civil society organisations would act as the organised interests of different publics. This, however, was also the CMS's Achilles Heel. If people needed to constitute themselves as representatives of a civil society organisation in order to participate, one registered officially with the appropriate paperwork in place, what potential exclusions might bureaucratising democracy in this way produce or exacerbate? Who didn't get to be seen or heard in these spaces because they hadn't constituted themselves as an interest group in order to seek representation? And who gained space for voice on the back of a registered association who they'd come to affiliate with for this purpose?

We'd interviewed and interacted with those who could make time for us, as well as for the work of the CMS. Was time to participate an inequitably distributed resource that would come to affect the quality of democracy in this space? Many of the people who were present in the CMS as civil society representatives were less well off; they were often working class or lower middle class, some had disabilities and didn't work, others were pensioners. What was it that people got out of being part of the CMS? Quite some number of those who worked were employed by the state, claiming their statutory right to have the time off work to attend CMS meetings. As one confided later, dull as the meetings sometimes were, they were a lot more interesting and less taxing than going to work. Another *conselheira* showed off her photo album, full of pictures of gatherings and trips to Recife and Brasilia as a member of the CMS. We became curious about the relationship members of the CMS had with other interested parties. These included political parties and particularly the parties of the left for whom these forms of participation formed such an important part of their electoral strategy, and for whose members the CMS could provide a stepping-stone into elected office as a local government councillor (*vereador*). To what extent, we wondered, was this space laced through with political patronage networks and relationships, and with what implications?

These were some of the questions that bubbled up out of our initial enquiry. Olhar Crítico moved on, fast paced, bringing the case studies together and interlacing analysis of the local dynamics of different forms of citizen participation with larger-scale studies of social movements and their role in creating a broader political landscape for transforming inequalities. It was a time in which much was changing for the better in Brazil. These years were the high point of Inácio Lula da Silva's presidency. The Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*) was transforming urban and rural life with imaginative social policies. The ambience of governance was thick with progressive buzzwords *Cidadania. Participação. Controle social*. It was too interesting to just stop there.

## The Ethnographic Presence

Out of Olhar Crítico and work with Brazilian political scientist Vera Schattan Coelho and IDS-based political sociologist John Gaventa came a theorisation of 'invited spaces' (Cornwall, 2002; Cornwall and Coelho, 2004; Cornwall and Gaventa, 2006): intermediary spaces between state and society in which state and non-state actors participate in the process of governance. In their ideal form, 'invited spaces' are deliberative arenas in which diverse publics engage with the state and seek responsiveness, listening, accountability and action. Collaborating with Vera brought a new set of questions, and with it, a return to more conventional style of

ethnographic research. Vera had been looking at institutional design in the municipal *conselho* of São Paulo, generating intriguing findings on how different rules of representation changed the nature of democratic deliberation and decision-making within these spaces (Coelho, 2004). Our collaboration surfaced the interplay between institutional design and the animation of these spaces by political agents whose styles of political action and registers were shaped in domains of discourse heavily inflected with party politics. The interviews that Nelson and Andrea had done were invaluable. But hearing the reflections of positioned political actors on the conduct of others could only lend a partial perspective. To approach this empirically, we needed to get to the heart of the action. We needed to see what was going on in the CMS meetings.

The project took a new turn. Ethnography requires presence, above all. Little else can substitute for it. It is not something that can be easily delegated or outsourced, although it can be done collaboratively and is especially rich when multiple pairs of eyes and ears observe and witness together. Recordings can capture some of the basic lines of argumentation that might be mobilised in such a space. Narrations and exegeses of documents presented at or produced at meetings can add another layer of insight. But to make any sense of what is going on, you need to sit there and watch, and use being present and witnessing as a jumping off point for ruminations and reflections with others who were also present, to dissect and chew over what was going on. Fortunately, ethnographic study of a *conselho* is less difficult than studying the day-to-day life of a parliament or other kind of elected chamber. It just requires showing up once a month.

Andrea was able to spend a couple of months in Brazil with her small children and their dad. This made it possible to attend two consecutive meetings of the CMS, get to know the secretariat staff, line up formal interviews and chat with as many *conselheira/os* as possible as often as possible. Relationships could be built that proved later on to be a vital source of gossip, analysis and leads that could be followed up with other social and political actors in the municipality. During this time, a municipal *conferência* was held. Convenors from Centro das Mulheres do Cabo and their activist colleagues from Recife used the space creatively, framing key deliberations over maternal health, humanised birth, abortion and contraception. By that stage, Andrea had got to know some of the participants well enough to benefit from running commentaries and back stories throughout the event, as well as to witness the impact of practices of Brazilian participatory governance on the interplay of personality, power and politics. There was, for example, frequent use of a rule that gave people only three minutes to speak before they were closed down; the technique provided chairs with a tool to manage grandstanding, political posturing and mansplaining.

In the years that followed, Andrea was involved in a number of projects with Brazilian colleagues in Rio, Salvador and São Paulo. She took to flying into Brazil via Recife, scheduling her trips to coincide with the meetings of the CMS. She'd drop by the secretariat, catch up on gossip, get a copy of the recordings of the meetings and the minutes, which were extensive and detailed on account of the recordings. This gave her vital clues as to what had been happening since her last visit. She'd bump into *conselheira/os* in the street, shoot the breeze, trade titbits of gossip. She'd pop into the clinic or the pharmacy or the municipal government secretariat to catch up with the key players. She became familiar enough to the main characters that they'd hail her in the street, call her over for a chat and keep her abreast of the latest twist or turn.

## The Failed Survey

Ethnographers face one challenge in making their research legible to political scientists and another in relation to comparability of their findings. Both are substantial. This makes comparative work difficult. For all that epistemological differences can present an unbridgeable divide, collaboration can be facilitated by methods that meet in the middle. And so it was that Andrea decided that it would be worth conducting a survey.



The idea was to take questions from surveys applied by Vera and IDS & CEBRAP colleagues Peter Houtzager and Adrian Gurza Lavalle, who were doing some interesting work on civil society participation in participatory governance spaces. A great deal of time was spent researching and putting together a questionnaire that would be applied to the list of civil society organisations who were registered as associations and appeared on the list of eligible organisations from whom representatives could be put forward for election onto the council. Andrea pre-tested the survey, finding herself straying time and again from the questions. Something that is under-examined in the literature is what doing ethnography does to the researcher; it becomes difficult, as a habituated ethnographer, to simply plough through a list of questions without wanting to probe and to follow up answers with unscripted questions. There is nothing more affirming of the ethnographic method than being exposed to the limitations of the conventional questionnaire survey at first hand by administering it in person.

Care was put into thinking about who might best administer the survey. The prospect of wool being pulled over the interviewer's eyes was high. The administrator of the CMS initially offered to do it. Then she found a colleague who'd been helping out in the office. The colleague had enough knowledge of the local scene to put the questions credibly. We were set to go. The first step seemed simple enough: to compile a list of all the civil society organisations in the municipality who were eligible to enter candidates to be elected to the CMS. From this, we'd be able to compose a purposive sample. As it turned out, this was hardly a neutral undertaking. There were many reasons for the creation of such a list to be politically undesirable, as we would soon find out. The survey process faltered at the first hurdle. What began to emerge from what would seem a relatively innocuous task became too difficult for the enumerator who had been hired for the task to persist with. The politics was such that it would likely have cost her at least her job.

Getting an accurate list of civil society organisations does not sound that tricky a task until you begin to reflect on what such a list might reveal. It was rumoured that some of those registered as associations were allegedly fronts for private medical companies or people with other kinds of political interests in who was on the CMS. Having dud organisations on the list of civil society organisations eligible for election offered two benefits. It supplied votes, as the system worked by identifying first the pool of potential representatives and then inviting everyone in that pool to vote. This could be useful for the administration if they were bent on pushing through a particular policy, as well as for getting accounts signed off without trouble. It also supplied seats for candidates who might have difficulty getting elected on the ticket of the association they were more closely associated with, either because that association had held a seat that was rotating or because the association was unpopular with a significant number of the electorate. Rules of representation requiring the presence of organisations representing particular kinds of civil society organisation – those working with children, social care, older people and so on – were a way in which candidates could find themselves a seat, as they operated effectively as quotas. All the candidates had to do was to stand on behalf of that organisation, and they were in.

The failed survey was a disappointment. There would be no numbers to compare, no comparative answers to the same questions to yield material to mull over. But if we hadn't tried to create a census in order to sample civil society organisations in the municipality it might never have come to light that 'civil society participation' was not all that it seemed. All of this was itself an 'ethnographic encounter' and grist for the ethnographer, rather than a major blow. It yielded some fascinating ethnographic material.

## Ethnographic Interactions

Like an old friend, ethnography was there to cushion the fleeting dismay caused by having to abandon the survey. Andrea returned to it with gusto, sitting in CMS meetings taking as close to verbatim notes as possible, recording dialogue, interactions, everything that was going on ‘front stage’. along with ‘back-stage’ looks, whispers and facial expressions. To aid what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) so memorably described as ‘thick description’, she also began experimenting with other methods for capturing what she was seeing. Emma Crewe writes:

... ethnography entails far more than interviews, shadowing, and a dash of observation. Ethnography requires whatever methods and theories assist in an analysis of the cultural logic of institutions rather than a set recipe of tools and techniques (2021: 3/14)

One of the methods that proved particularly interesting was an interaction map that built up a cumulative picture of the meeting. This started with a picture of the room with an x for each person. Each time people spoke, a circle would be drawn around their x. Arrows would indicate where they were aiming their remarks, whether into the centre of the room, towards the Chair or at neighbours. The map provided a visual record of the meeting, showing how key actors were shaping the debate. It was also useful to situate and trace the monopolising of the dialogic space by particular characters. It gave a far more accurate picture than what might be picked up from just observing the meeting.

It was amply clear from the interaction map that there was not only uneven but very partial participation. There was also some ‘strategic non-participation’ (Cortez Ruiz 2004) going on. Some *conselheiras/os* remained silent throughout. Some never got a word in edgeways. Some failed to get the President’s attention for their raised hand and didn’t follow the most assertive of the members of the CMS by simply barging into the conversation by talking loudly over others as their voices tailed off, in that short interval in which interjections can steal into the space before the President once again notes a raised hand. But others simply sat there without ever seeking to interject. The best-known silence was from the woman who was nicknamed “the silent nun”. She turned up bang on time for meetings and left as promptly, without ever exchanging any words. Rumour had it she was one of the clients of the municipal administration, who allegedly sought to stack the CMS with people who wouldn’t vote against their budget or policies. Yay-sayers. There were also the nay-sayers, the ones who would object out of the pleasure of objection. One of them, an older Black man, would spin long animated tales of contestation and conquest in the run up to the meeting and object vociferously if there was the slightest variation in procedure being proposed. But he would often fall asleep during the presentation of the budget and programmatic priorities.

While he was the only one who dropped off during the main business of the meeting, he wasn’t alone in being reduced to dull silence when such matters were under discussion. This in itself was intriguing. The ostensible business of the *conselho* was to deliberate and then to sign off on policy, the accounts and the allocated health budget. But rarely were any questions raised about the formal business being put before the meeting. Indeed, it was relatively rare for any observations at all to be made about any other regular agenda item concerning the core business of the CMS. Was it that people were ill-equipped to ask questions about the accounts? Were they bored by the detail? Or was there something else at play – especially where an alignment of political party affiliation and state-civil society patron-client networks (after all, many of the organisations present were contracted by the state to deliver services and may well have had something to lose if they started asking too many questions) might make studied silence or obfuscation a political strategy in itself?

In contrast, there was frequently animated debate about ways of working. The conduct of the meetings appeared to be of much more concern to participants than what they were ostensibly there to do. In fact, so much so that this effectively *became* the core business of the CMS, with the formal business of the meeting relegated to a swift run-through close to the end. Of course, the art of agenda-packing and strategic placement of key items at the end of an agenda is as well known in these spaces as in any others. But what the ethnographer was able to witness was something else. It was the very *deliberability* of the processes and procedures of participatory governance itself that was evident in these meetings. Participatory governance in this context took the form of vigorous participation in contesting, debating, and redefining the very fabric of the governance institution itself. Elsewhere, Andrea uses an extended case study of a challenge to the rules of representation to explore this theme and its implications for how we think about deliberation and democracy in settings like these (Cornwall, 2008).

### **Ethnographic Sensibilities**

Dropping in, catching up, connecting the dots, Andrea attended as many meetings as she could and worked hard to make sense of the ones in between. Silvia stopped going so regularly to the CMS, although the CMC retained a seat as a civil society representative. The CMC were to go on to use that seat tactically to bring in a range of less prominent civil society actors to gain experience of working with government in these spaces. They were able in this way to open otherwise closed or colonised spaces to interest groups who would otherwise barely gain any opportunity for voice or presence: the fledgling LGBT association in the town, the sex workers' association, local women's organisations from the low-income settlements at the edges of town. Arguably, they were drawing on and amplifying their own patron-client network in this way. But through the art of substitution, with mentoring and support, they were able to deepen and broaden democratic engagement across the various *conselhos* in the municipality. Mapping those spaces, strategizing over deployment into them, and then coordinating across them, served to enable CMC to work in a joined-up way across a range of sectoral *conselhos*.

Equally, the political parties were able to operate in a similar fashion: mapping the spaces and placing candidates in them under the guise of a cluster of civil society organisations that could be used interchangeably so when the tenure of one ran out, the same person could re-appear under the badge of another. Links through into the formal political arena were evident, both in people's aspirations and career trajectories and in terms of sponsorship and support. Aspirants for elected political office saw the CMS as a soft entry into a representative role that could give them visibility with the municipal government and with the citizens in their areas, a springboard into electability as *vereadores* (municipal councillors). Understanding the role of political affiliations and appreciating the interconnectedness of political spaces and the actors who traverse them is vital in decoding the political dynamics of the space of the CMS. The conventional instruments of the political scientist might well miss the way in which the traces of interactions in other spaces are etched into 'invited spaces' (Cornwall, 2002) such as these, simply because these are questions that are tricky to ask and difficult to frame without having witnessed these dynamics in play.

Participant observation revealed the extent to which religious organisations and political parties kept the *conselhos* and associated institutions like the *conferências* in a relatively tight grip. Andrea saw this play out on a larger national stage when she travelled to Brasilia to the *Conferência Nacional de Saúde* and watched the Catholic Church skilfully mobilise to block progressive policy moves in reproductive health. It was also evident in the way Lula's government worked to frame the space. At the *Conferência*, the slogan "*Aqui é permitida sonhar*" – "Here, it is permitted to dream" – hung in a large banner over the proceedings, speaking to the democratising impulse of the participatory governance architecture as a space for the imagination,

the spirit and for the diversity of Brazil's citizenry to find a place and a voice. This vision of participatory governance is one that is inherently party-political: strongly associated with the Partido de Trabalhadores (PT) on whose platform Lula came to power, although also emblematic of a philosophy of governance embraced by other leftist parties. The power of that imaginary was regularly invoked through the language used to describe what was happening in these spaces and the very idea of them being *deliberativo* – not deliberative, in the English sense of the word, but spaces with decision-making power in which binding decisions can be made.

Participatory governance institutions are arenas where agendas are rehearsed, demands are framed and constituencies sought and built on issues that play out in formal political spaces. They are also places where dense patronage networks that span different kinds of political spaces are activated and operationalised, where political points are scored, and political narratives mobilised. These are spaces in which it is those with speaking skills that are honed through party-political gatherings will likely stand the most chance of being heard, and where the less eloquent or fervent can find themselves talked over or their points left hanging in the air as the debate moves onto ground that has been better rehearsed elsewhere. There's a gender dynamic to this, but it is one so inflected with political affiliation that it is complex to discern or disentangle. Ethnography provides powerful methodological tools to make sense of how all this works to create a particular ambiance, with particular political effects.

The CMS became for Andrea like a long-running telenovela. It didn't quite feel like the right time to stop watching. Her visits continued. She'd drop in on the office, meet up with Silvia and colleagues in the Centro das Mulheres do Cabo to chew over the latest, and touch base with conselheira/os old and new to hear what they made of what was going on. A new President was elected. He was a Black man from a low-income neighbourhood who was physically disabled and used a wheelchair. He took the conversation back to equipping the newly elected conselheira/os with training, so they knew what they were doing. With each new President and each new cohort of conselheira/os, this demand would resurface. This time, though, it seemed to be happening. Andrea attended the training. It was very dry. No-one asked questions. In the next meeting, the debate was all about the rules again, rather than the content about health policy and the setting and approval of budgets on which the cohort had been trained. Deliberating democracy continued to be of far more interest to members of the CMS than poring over the accounts or participating in deliberation over the finer details of health policy (Cornwall, 2008).

Over time, the project morphed into a longitudinal ethnographic study of the CMS, tracing its fortunes through different conjunctures: changing municipal administrations, with a sequence of different political parties taking charge of the municipality; changing Presidents of the CMS, with a succession of three civil society Presidents and one two-year period in which the Secretary of Health took charge, as was standard elsewhere in the country; changing national and state-level politics, with one period of alignment that ran all the way through from municipal to state to national and in which a host of democratising changes seemed possible, but in which the emerging political dynamics that were to undermine that potential were all too evident.

The term 'ethnographic sensibility' has gained currency in Political Science over the last decade or so (Pader, 2006; Jourde, 2009; Simmons and Smith, 2017; Herzog and Zacka 2019). Herzog and Zacka write:

Adopting an ethnographic sensibility involves being interested in what people do as well as why they do it. It is to be concerned with how they perceive, think about, and ascribe meaning to their environment and behavior... it involves observing how people respond to specific situations and trying to make sense of what these situations look like to them – interpreting their interpretations of the social world (2019: 764).

Approaching the study of political institutions with this sensibility enables a closer reading of what is going on. An ethnographic sensibility can render the participant observer alert to the dialect of political activists from the left parties that saturates these spaces, or the party-political gestures and rituals that create a continuity with other, more informal, spaces, where people come together with members of their political party or gather for rallies. This sensibility infused conversations about the CMS between us, and with other observers and analysts of the CMS with whom we engaged. These were reflective, descriptive, interpretive discussions worthy of any ethnographic research project. Participants in those conversations brought examples, adduced evidence, lent critique and drew out broader conclusions. That these ethnographic reflections were collaborative made them more pithy, nuanced, and insightful.

### **On Political Ethnography: Finalising Considerations**

As this article has sought to argue and affirm, ethnographic research has much to offer the study of political institutions. The different phases through which this research project evolved illustrate a number of different modes of using ethnographic methods for researching political institutions. The initial, more collaborative, phase brought together an experienced social movement leader with deep knowledge of the institution, a senior Brazilian political economist equipped with comparative insights, and a British anthropologist with an interest in the micro-dynamics of power and the application of political theory. The process reversed the relationship between researcher and researched, as the social movement leader deployed the researchers as research assistants, framing questions and guiding analysis. Autoethnography of sorts came into play as the social movement leader reflected on her own experience and worked together with the researchers to tease apart the dynamics in the creation and development of the CMS.

As the project morphed into a biography of the CMS over a longer period, researched through intermittent ethnographic encounters, it became more conventionally ethnographic. In the process, ethnography brought us rich material to think with. Being able to engage with the ongoing saga of the CMS with new questions, new conceptualisations and through new ethnographic encounters provided a deeper understanding of the wider locus of these institutions in a crowded political landscape, and into some of the otherwise hidden dynamics and unintended consequences of their institutional design (see Cornwall, 2008). Those moments of close observation, the hastily scribbled notes seeking to capture every detail, every interjection and response, every scowl and smile, all evoked the texture, the dynamics and the feel of what was going on in ways that descriptions in interviews would not have been able to capture. The collaboration and the relationships built in the first phase enabled a greater depth and intimacy of understanding that would have taken a much more immersive ethnographic experience to build. Over time, our collaboration brought other insights, as we engaged with different audiences and framings.

What did we learn that the conventional toolbox of political science would not have taught us? Some of what we learned might have been hypothesised, but would have been difficult to verify using surveys: that there was a dense, capillary network that linked actors in different political spaces and made the *conselho* a site for a number of projects, including the pursuit of personal agendas, that played out in other arenas – what Auyero calls the ‘grey zone of politics’ (in Auyero and Joseph, 2007); that modes of ‘doing politics’ in the *conselho* were imbricated with cultures of politics in other spaces, notably those of political parties; that leadership played a determining role in realising or dampening the democratic potential of spaces such as these. But there were things that we found out that might never have been asked: that the ‘civil society’ presence in the *conselho* served many purposes, not least the maintenance of existing clientelistic relations with the government and that very few, if any, of the ‘civil society’ participants engaged with the ostensible purpose of the *conselho*; that participation in participatory governance spaces was less about civil society

organisations exercising ‘citizen voice’ than a project of civic education that could equip ‘uncivil society’ with the knowledge and understanding to play their part in the designs for democracy that the *conselhos* represent; and, ultimately, that institutional design can be both a bulwark against the incivility of ‘civil society’ and in its undoing, the *unmaking* of democracy within spaces such as these (Cornwall, 2008).

More than anything, our experience affirmed the value of ethnographic research in offering the political theorist and scholar of political institutions precious glimpses inside these spaces, bringing political culture into view and into analysis with all the ‘details and effects of different forms of political action, networks and tactics’, as Auyero and Joseph (2007: 3), cited earlier, suggest. Ethnography animates the scene with a cast of characters, their gestures and rhetoric, their raised and dimmed voices, their disagreements, and their silences. With this, we gain an expanded understanding of the texture of political life, and with it the political dynamics within institutions that are difficult to otherwise perceive or grasp. What ethnography permits the researcher to do is to be curious about concepts that might otherwise be taken for granted, like ‘civil society’, ‘democracy’ or ‘accountability’, and to explore the meanings they have for those who inhabit political institutions. This, too, is a way in which ethnography contributes to the study of politics: by ‘making the familiar strange and the strange familiar’.<sup>2</sup> The techniques of the ethnographer, the pliable and improvisational qualities of ethnographic method, an ‘ethnographic sensibility’ and the pursuit of ‘ethnographic encounters’ all, we contend, make an invaluable contribution to the methodological toolkit of researchers studying political institutions, whether as part of collaborative, participatory, multi-methods, or ethnographic research. It is time more political scientists began broadening their horizons and using them.

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<sup>2</sup> This well-used maxim is attributed to the German poet Novalis (1772-1801).

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# Gobernanza, reciprocidad y dinámicas políticas en Brasil: la auditoría como campo etnográfico

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## Resumen

La propuesta de este artículo es profundizar en la rutina de las instituciones de gobernanza, teniendo como espacio investigativo la gestión contratada de unidades de salud pública en un estado federativo de Brasil; fueron problematizadas las acciones de los agentes públicos enredados en las dinámicas de poder, construidas y mantenidas por las élites gubernativas y políticas. La investigación de campo tuvo como perspectiva metodológica la observación participante, que duró trece meses y exigió una mirada hacia el enfoque normativo, que dota al cotidiano administrativo de reglas formales; y otra mirada hacia las conductas informales y/o paralelas que atraviesan la rutina gubernativa, imponiendo sus reglas. Esta doble mirada fue una condición necesaria para aprehender cómo funciona el poder gubernativo al interior del movimiento de sus élites. Los resultados del estudio muestran las tramas que conducen hacia la apropiación de lo público con fines privados. Los análisis conclusivos afirman que el patrimonialismo sigue presente en el modo de gobernar las instituciones y conducir la política en Brasil.

**Palabras clave:** instituciones de gobernanza; poder político; gestión contratada; patrimonialismo.

# Governança, reciprocidade e dinâmicas políticas no Brasil: a auditoria como campo etnográfico

## Resumo

A proposta deste artigo é submergir na rotina das instituições de governança tendo como espaço investigativo a gestão direta e contratada de unidades de saúde públicas num estado federativo do Brasil onde foram problematizadas as ações dos agentes públicos entrelaçados nas dinâmicas de poder construídas e mantidas pelas elites governativas e políticas. A investigação de campo teve como perspectiva metodológica a observação participante ocorrida no tempo de treze meses, e exigiu um olhar direcionado ao enfoque normativo que dota o cotidiano administrativo de regras formais; e outro olhar direcionado às condutas informais e/ou paralelas que atravessam a rotina governativa impondo suas regras. Este duplo olhar foi uma condição necessária para aprender como funciona o poder governativo desde dentro do movimento de suas elites. Os resultados do estudo mostram as tramas que conduzem a apropriação do público como privado e as análises conclusivas afirmam que o patrimonialismo continua presente no modo de governar as instituições e de conduzir a política no Brasil.

**Palavras-chave:** Instituições de governança; poder político; gestão contratada; patrimonialismo.

# Governance, reciprocity and political dynamics in Brazil: auditorship as an ethnographic field

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to immerse in the routine of the governance institutions having as an investigative field the direct and contracted management of public health units in a federal state in Brazil where the actions of public agents - intertwined in the dynamics of power built and maintained by governmental and political elites - were problematized. The investigation field had as methodological perspective the participant observation during the period of thirteen months and which required a look directed to the normative approach that endows the administrative routine of formal rules, and another look directed to informal and/or parallel conducts that cross the governmental routine imposing its rules. This double view was a necessary condition to learn how governmental power works from within the movement of its elites. The results of the study show the plots that lead to the appropriation of the public sector for private purposes and the conclusive analyses affirm that patrimonialism is still present in the way of governing institutions and conducting politics in Brazil.

**Keywords:** Governance institutions; political power; contracted management; patrimonialism.

# Gobernanza, reciprocidad y dinámicas políticas en Brasil: la auditoría como campo etnográfico

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## Introducción

Este artículo presenta una etnografía sobre la gobernanza en el sector de la salud en Brasil y propone investigar las prácticas, políticas y administrativas, demarcadas dentro del campo de la atención sanitaria contratada con Organizaciones Sociales de Salud (OSS).

Partimos de los aspectos orgánicos de la gobernanza democrática de la República Federativa de Brasil, resguardados en las garantías constitucionales<sup>1</sup> en vigor y amparados en normativas complementarias<sup>2</sup> que regulan las directrices políticas<sup>3</sup> y administrativas de la estructura burocrática del Estado, esto es, las subdivisiones administrativas delimitadas dentro de un plan funcional, directo e indirecto. Luego, demarcamos en la referida estructura la reforma administrativa que ha instituido la gestión contratada<sup>4</sup> y las Organizaciones Sociales como elementos –y actores políticos– relevantes en el cotidiano gubernativo de la administración de hospitales públicos.

Cabe citar que escogimos un estado de la región nordeste de Brasil como espacio de análisis, y dentro de sus 22 subsecretarías administrativas<sup>5</sup> acotamos el estudio a la Secretaría de Estado de Sanidad (SS). En el trabajo de campo se logró alcanzar el sector de seguimiento y fiscalización (DAFH) y unidades con administración contratada (es decir, los casos en que las administraciones de las unidades hospitalarias hayan sido absorbidas por las OSS en dicho Estado).<sup>6</sup>

Tomando los aspectos anteriormente descritos, dentro del recorte de juzgamos oportuno desmembrar el cotidiano abordado, dentro del marco institucional planteado para este artículo, en dos dominios o tiempos: por un lado, el curso del mandato administrativo, el tiempo de gobierno (los actos y procesos administrativos dirigidos a la ejecución presupuestaria, especialmente la realización financiera, de gastos, sus respectivos procedimientos burocráticos, y de rendición de cuentas o transparencia pública). Y por otro, “el tiempo de la política” (Palmeira & Heredia, 2010: 28), que aparece como el tiempo de alianzas, resultados electorales, partidarios, personales o privados, que surgen como componentes formales e informales en la gestión cotidiana.

1 La Constitución de la República Federativa de Brasil fue promulgada en 1988 y compilada por la enmienda constitucional 105/2019.

2 Me limito a los aspectos formales o regulatorios trabajados dentro del marco de discusión de esta investigación.

3 Estas directrices se afirman en la Ley Federal Nº 9.504/97 (que establece normas para las elecciones en Brasil) y en la Ley Nº 4.737 del 15 de julio de 1965 (que instituye el Código Electoral Brasileño).

4 Esta dirección administrativa surgió a partir de la Ley Federal Nº 9.637/98, que “Dispone sobre la calificación de entidades como Organizaciones Sociales, la creación del programa nacional de publicación, la extinción de los órganos y entidades que menciona la absorción de sus actividades por Organizaciones Sociales y da otras providencias”.

5 Incumbidas de desarrollar las actividades necesarias al funcionamiento de referida máquina pública

6 Esto se logró a partir de la inmersión como observador participante dentro de las prácticas de auditoría asociada al sector de fiscalización y seguimiento de contratos de gestión de la misma secretaria.

Recurrimos también a categorías como intercambio, alianzas o reciprocidad, buscando utilizarlas como recursos analíticos para pensar ciertas conductas y alianzas observables en el campo, a partir de los dominios simbólicos establecidos en medio de relaciones de poder. Es importante aclarar que no quisimos realizar un estudio exhaustivo sobre la reciprocidad inmiscuida en estas relaciones, sino sobre la utilización de ciertas categorías, como “el don y contra-don” de Mauss (1979 [1936]), para explicitar algunas lógicas existentes dentro de los procesos y conductas del cotidiano, gubernativo y político, de la institución que decidimos estudiar.

En ese sentido, no identificamos la administración pública y la política como práctica universalista o igualitaria, sino más bien desde una perspectiva inacabada, negociable, jerárquica y excluyente con relación a los que han sido sometidos a los vínculos subalternos y a la “política de los gobernados” (Chatterjee, 2008), o al “patrimonialismo” de Faoro (2001) y Holanda (1995).

Vale decir que, aun con todos los esfuerzos desplegados en el emprendimiento investigativo, estar a la altura de esta “realidad” no ha sido una tarea sencilla, toda vez que, como ha dicho Geertz, “lo que une semejante caos de incidentes a un cosmos de sentimientos y creencias es extremadamente oscuro, y más oscuro aún es el intento de formularlo” (1973: 262). Por esta razón, juzgamos significativo definir desde un primer momento tanto el marco metodológico (el auditor como etnógrafo: la observación participante y el estudio cualitativo de datos documentales posibilitados a partir del vínculo profesional) como los conceptos centrales que han servido como nociones clave, transformadas en el tipo de construcción abordado en el transcurso del texto.

Bourdieu dijo haberse alegrado mucho un día cuando encontró un texto de Weber que decía: “los agentes sociales obedecen a la regla cuando el interés en obedecerla la coloca por encima del interés en desobedecerla” (Bourdieu, 1988: 83). Dijo además que “esta buena y sana fórmula materialista es interesante, porque recuerda que la regla no es automáticamente por sí sola y obliga a preguntarse en qué condición una regla puede actuar” (Bourdieu, 1988:83).

Dentro de la delimitación del problema aquí planteado asumimos inicialmente el desafío de indagar la atención a las reglas que dotan de formalidad el cotidiano institucional investigado<sup>7</sup> (tomando como ejemplo las directrices definidas en los contratos de gestión celebrados entre el Estado y las OSS, y otros procedimientos internos que, además de hallarse fundamentados en las leyes citadas en las notas al pie 1, 3 y 4, dotan el campo alcanzado de formalidad administrativa).<sup>8</sup>

Además, la experiencia de campo nos condujo a la percepción de un cotidiano institucional tomado por interferencias, políticas y privadas, que influenciaban sobremanera los actos gestión o toma de decisiones administrativas. En ese sentido, dichas interferencias potencializaban la manutención de actividades informales o decisiones paralelas que, vistas desde la óptica normativa, pasaron a ser percibidas como incumplimientos que colaboraban con el sostenimiento de la estructura jerárquica-gubernativa y el dominio político establecido.

Todo ello implicó guiar los análisis, discusiones teóricas y presentación de los hallazgos de campo reflejados en las secciones subsiguientes del presente texto, considerando un doble cuestionamiento: ¿hasta qué punto las prácticas legales prevalecen o modelan actitudes que controlan las estructuras institucionales, y de qué forma pueden ser manipuladas? Y también, ¿de qué forma las actitudes o arreglos informales o para-legales, vinculados al dominio político, configuran el modo de conducción de los actos de gestión y privilegian garantías o apropiaciones privadas, más allá de los objetivos públicos o democráticos?

7 Nos referimos a objetivos, metas, indicadores de atención y otras obligaciones definidas dentro del acuerdo firmado entre el contratante (Estado) y contratado (OSS).

8 Las directrices aludidas orientan las conductas direccionadas a la transparencia administrativa.

## La auditoría como campo etnográfico

Como perspectiva de intervención en el campo, optamos por la etnografía como el método que nos guiaría a través de la selección estratégica, y de técnicas de investigación que posibilitarían demarcar lo que consideramos sería la mejor forma de recolección de datos. Tratamos de privilegiar, en un primer momento, la observación participante como perspectiva de intervención; y, en un segundo tiempo, el examen de documentos como perspectiva de análisis etnográfico, cuestionándonos ¿qué hay en el campo? y ¿qué más de esa “realidad” nos revelan sus documentos?

Creemos que delimitar esta experiencia y sus fuentes de información a partir de una perspectiva etnográfica, asociando sus elementos (agentes, procesos y documentos) al procedimiento de análisis participativo, nos permitió un tipo de vivencia que posibilitó reunir, en el campo, la mayor cantidad de experiencias y datos relacionados a procesos de rendición de cuentas, así como a un proceso criminal, asociado al campo y al que accedimos en el momento de intervención. Esta acción investigativa se dio a través de la interacción con sus agentes, y de la auditoría sobre las prácticas, que fueron muy importantes para el análisis de la problemática planteada; hubiese resultado más compleja la aplicación de otro tipo de método que no contemplara la vivencia, en sí misma, y la observación de las conductas que permean las entrelíneas de la acción.

Dentro de la delimitación de los sujetos asociados al campo abordado, fueron considerados agentes públicos aquellos servidores públicos (permanentes o contratados) responsables por el comando, coordinación de actividades administrativas directas y ordenamiento de gastos asociados a una función pública: secretarios de estado, directores de unidades de salud, coordinadores, gerentes de sectores (identificados en los relatos etnográficos, respectivamente, con los códigos “S”, “D”, “g”, seguidos de un número); y también líderes de núcleos administrativos citados en el proceso criminal del Ministerio Público Fiscal (“NA”, “NE” o “NP”); finalmente aquellos empleados que en los testimonios citados hayan sido identificados con el código “f” (seguidos de número), que en la institución elegida para el estudio ocupaban puestos subordinados.

Agentes políticos son aquellos individuos que están asociados a un grupo político y que han sido elegidos para el comando de una función ejecutiva, o de fiscalización de actividades administrativas de competencia, y mediante un mandato público determinado: gobernadores (G1 y G2), y diputados (Dp).

“Privados” son aquellas Organizaciones Sociales de Salud (OSS) y agentes que ocupan cargos directivos, o cumplen con actividades administrativas en unidades públicas de salud, es decir, mediante contrato de gestión celebrado entre el Estado y la OSS, que han recibido recursos públicos para desarrollar actividades administrativas sanitarias de responsabilidad pública.

En el alcance y la apertura del campo, la delimitación de las técnicas investigativas y la posibilidad de realización de la intervención participante planificada para el espacio institucional acotado se dieron a partir de la vinculación profesional continuada, asociada a labores de auditoría y fiscalización.

Es decir que, por dicho enlace profesional, el estudio se construye en base a esa posibilidad de acceso privilegiado, a documentos y a rutinas, administrativas y políticas. Asimismo, vale recordar que dicha inserción y perspectiva no deja de estar restringida a ciertas limitaciones y dilemas éticos, propios de este tipo de abordaje y construcción metodológica (acceso a instituciones, sus espacios cerrados, diálogos ocultados y elites representativas). El contexto implicó considerar la necesidad de limitar la investigación a la posibilidad de acceso e intervención razonable dentro del campo político y gubernativo estudiado,<sup>9</sup> las conductas y documentos institucionales o jurídicos asociados a la administración pública hospitalaria contratada en un Estado Federativo de Brasil.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Es decir, el sector de seguimiento y fiscalización de los contratos de gestión (DAFH) de la Secretaría de Estado de Sanidad; gestores y agentes administrativos alcanzados.

<sup>10</sup> El nombre del Estado no será divulgado, en virtud de priorizar el sigilo de las fuentes, y evitando la posibilidad de asociaciones. Vale destacar, asimismo, que hemos tenido actuación directa en esta área profesional en cuatro Estados Federativos de Brasil, y escogimos uno de ellos como observatorio para el presente análisis.

Colocamos esta doble mirada (profesional y etnográfica) dentro de un enlace colaborativo, considerando los lapsos conflictivos propios de la práctica vivenciada; es decir, mientras en ciertos momentos el auditor parecía decir al yo etnógrafo ¡contrólate!, buscando interponer límites ético-profesionales, el observador participante parecía atender a una u otra situación, como clave para el objeto de estudio. Sólo aquel acceso privilegiado permitía verlas así, tan a menudo, tan cerca y aparentemente más claras.

En el momento de las intervenciones, cuando pasaba de profesional a etnógrafo, priorizaba las conversaciones informales o entrevistas no directivas, buscando lograr un mayor acercamiento personal, para disminuir las tensiones provocadas por el peso de la agenda de fiscalización (es decir, mi presentación ante las gerencias, o interacción con equipos, dada a través de mi vinculación oficial e identificación como miembro de la comisión de fiscalización, asociado a las prácticas de gestión en análisis).

Considerando la necesidad de sigilo de las fuentes, cabe resaltar que fueron ocultados nombres de los autores, las organizaciones contratadas y período exacto de intervención, buscando evitar riesgos de asociaciones. Así, el periodo de observación participante no ha sido especificado con precisión dentro de su cronología de intervención, ya que han sido trece meses de inmersión ocurridos entre el momento de disputa electoral de 20X5 y el año de sucesión del gobierno de EG1 (asumido por GS2 en 20X6).

En lo tocante a la orientación de los diálogos, se realizaban preguntas abiertas, utilizadas al momento de las charlas, conforme ha descrito Guber (2001); se trataba de priorizar las conversaciones informales, por lo que las charlas no eran estandarizadas, ni seguían siempre el mismo fraseo, orden o constancia de realización, que era contextual (algunas veces puntuales); y, en gran medida, demandaban poco tiempo.

Como la doble experiencia citada se producía en diversas dinámicas administrativas y de poder, en lo que concierne a los obstáculos más frecuentes de la rutina investigativa, en el contexto citado, los espacios dominados por poderosos y decisiones políticas se encontraban fuera de alcance en numerosos planos, ya que “ellos [los poderosos] no quieren ser estudiados; es peligroso estudiar a los poderosos; son gente muy ocupada; no se encuentran todos en un mismo lugar; y otras razones parecidas” (Nader, 1972: 14).

Aunque el vínculo profesional permitía superar algunos desafíos en términos de acceso a las élites y al cotidiano relatado, asimismo sentía la necesidad de estar atento a la postura del investigador con relación a los sujetos, tornándose esencial la reflexión sugerida por Teixeira (2014) y pensar sobre el modo de interacción con los sujetos, o reflexionar sobre la relación con el otro y la mejor manera que tenía para comunicarnos en el campo.

Por otro lado, tuve que afrontar el dilema ético-profesional que sugería límites al observador participante, ya que a menudo éste se chocaba con informaciones privilegiadas dentro de la posibilidad de acceso a los archivos, al proceso criminal<sup>11</sup> y análisis de documentos propios del oficio de auditoría, y de la confrontación de estos datos con los discursos, relatos obtenidos y dinámicas de poder visibilizadas a partir de la oportunidad de haber “estado allí” (Geertz, 1973).

## **Reciprocidad, política y gobernanza pública en Brasil**

Al estructurar las pautas descritas en la parte introductoria y las indicaciones metodológicas definidas en la sección anterior hemos constituido la dualidad espacio formal versus rutina informal como aspecto fundamental para discutir las conductas desveladas en la experiencia observada.

<sup>11</sup> Me refiero a la “Denuncia n.º xx del MP”, así como en los anexos y videos de las delaciones premiadas de NE1 y S3 asociados al mismo proceso criminal: considerando la necesidad de sigilo de las fuentes no identificaremos el número de denuncia y los agentes que han estado implicados en referido proceso criminal.

Algo parecido a las reflexiones Chatterjee (2008) cuando entendió que, en la administración de los servicios públicos, el carácter ficticio de esta construcción legal se convierte en un hecho innegable, que no puede ser obviado al diseñar las políticas.

De esta contradicción resulta una doble estrategia complementaria, de negación y afirmación simultánea. Encontramos acuerdos paralegales que modifican, matizan o complementan, en el ámbito contingente de la sociedad política, unas estructuras formales de propiedad que, necesitan, sin embargo, seguir siendo afirmadas y protegidas dentro del dominio legalmente constituido de la sociedad civil (Chatterjee, 2008: 153).

Se busca con ello describir los componentes del campo y del cotidiano institucional a partir de esta doble mirada; por un lado, basado en la percepción de que los agentes públicos y privados (contratados) estaban inmersos en un espacio fundado en normas legitimadoras de procesos burocráticos. Por otro, sin embargo, a partir de la experiencia vivida, se ha querido demostrar que este mismo ambiente institucional estaba atravesado por otras conductas, actos y rutinas informales, o decisiones políticas paralelas, trazadas por las élites del gobierno y normalizadas, para ser cumplidas como obligaciones dentro del cotidiano gubernativo.

Se entendió que desconsiderar esta doble mirada hubiese significado alejarse de lo que he planteado para esta propuesta investigativa, en el sentido de vivir y reflejar la experiencia de la auditoría como campo etnográfico. Dentro de la posibilidad de conducir la mirada a los rituales institucionales, hemos percibido a partir de tal práctica que, a pesar de las dinámicas burocráticas asociadas a los análisis de los procedimientos de control surgieron, como elementos presentes en el ambiente delimitado, reglamentos y documentos (integrados a los informes de rendición de cuentas y proceso criminal). Sin embargo, las dinámicas de poder y conductas personalistas (asociadas a la reciprocidad surgida de la interacción cotidiana de los agentes administrativos y políticos) también formaban parte de dicho momento y “realidad”.

De tal manera, considerando las indicaciones de Comerford y Bezerra (2013) respecto a las inquietudes que han sido desarrolladas en el ámbito de los estudios sobre prácticas políticas en Brasil, cuando se las considera a partir del punto de vista de los agentes sociales, desarrollar estudios en contextos políticos debería permitir refinar la percepción de las complejas maneras por las cuales determinadas sociedades establecen recortes de dominios, clasificaciones y discontinuidades significativas.

Pero incluso deseando presentar los datos y testimonios a partir de una perspectiva local, atribuir un recorte categórico y analítico a este estudio significó, también, acercarnos a las definiciones de los autores que serán citados en seguida, y en cuyas discusiones se encuentran como mínimo en dos sentidos: a través de la representación de la dominación política sobre aparato estatal, y cuando la noción de apropiación privada de la cosa pública se haya convertido en una noción central dentro del análisis y prácticas evidenciadas en los hallazgos de campo.

Si desde el punto de vista de servidores subordinados sus labores estaban condicionadas a decisiones jerárquicas que deberían ser asumidas sin cuestionamiento,

Existe una base de datos con contactos de proveedores, intentaba actualizarla buscando opciones más económicas, pero la indicación era de priorizar algunos proveedores que ya constaban en la lista, decían que muchos de los que estaban ahí eran buenos y parceros con nosotros, afirmaban que incluso entregaban los pedidos cuando el hospital estaba endeudado (...) ¡los de arriba mandan, nosotros cumplimos! (f2, conversación informal en campo).

“¿Ves este panel ahí colgado?, lo dejo ahí visible, así necesitamos hacer las cosas, pero muchos solían llegar con sus pedidos (...) yo les mostraba este procedimiento que debíamos seguir y les señalaba que la cosa no es así, pero la gente no solía hacerme caso, afirmaban otra vez, ¡es urgente!, ¿y yo qué iba hacer?” (g1, conversación informal en campo).



Los testimonios obtenidos y la observación participante realizada por el etnógrafo conducían a la percepción que las jerarquías administrativas y políticas con control estatal (humano, económico y burocrático) implementaban prácticas en conflicto con los principios de la gestión pública, transparencia y normas existentes. Podríamos caracterizar teóricamente dichas prácticas como patrimonialistas, volcadas a los intereses, políticos o privados, de las élites dominantes (Weber, 2007 [1919]), de los políticos profesionales que viven de la política y no para la política.

A partir de DaMatta (1997) significó asociar dicho conflicto a la percepción del individuo como persona o como ciudadano, que comporta la categorización de “ciudadanía relacional” (DaMatta, 1997: 62), conllevando a una “lógica de las lealtades relacionales” (1997:62) que permite entenderla como “vínculos difusos de la ciudadanía universal” (Leniado, 2001: 238), inscritas en una lógica inversa a la orientación de los compromisos públicos.<sup>12</sup>

A la luz de Faoro (2001) tal contexto nos aproximó de la noción de estamento patrimonialista. Inspirados en la noción weberiana de “estamento” (Stand), aplicándolo a la sociedad brasileña, en la formación y división de sus estructuras básicas (cada cual cumpliendo un estatuto jurídico/social o con un papel propio a desempeñar), así nos acercamos teóricamente a Faoro (2001) quién sugiere que la sociedad brasilera ha sido construida históricamente y moldada por un tipo de estamento patrimonialista, “un grupo estamental correspondiente al tipo tradicional de dominación política, en que el poder no es una función pública, sino un objeto de apropiación privada.” (Faoro, 2001: 332).

El estamento burocrático desarrolla padrones típicos de conductas ante el cambio interno (...). Gravitando en órbita propia no atrae, para fundirse, el elemento de abajo, advenido de todas las clases. En lugar de integrar, comanda, no conduce, sino gobierna. Incorpora las generaciones necesarias a sus servicios, valorizando pedagógica y autoritariamente las reservas para sus cuadros, cooptándolos, con la marca de su cuño tradicional (Faoro, 2001: 830).

Faoro (2001) se refiere al Estado en su ejercicio legítimo de dominación y manipulación de la agencia burocrática, como diría Weber (1999 [1922]), concebidas como la legitimidad del derecho de mando, manejado y controlado por una red de agentes patrimoniales.<sup>13</sup> De acuerdo a Holanda (1995), esta red vigila esa estructura, la dirige y conduce a la consolidación de un proyecto de poder político, accionando y manipulando los instrumentos burocráticos, se a través de su eje normativo, sea por vía de su control informal, realizado por los agentes a los que el autor atribuyó el nombre de funcionarios patrimoniales. Existen otras denominaciones: Chatterjee (2008) los llamó funcionarios gubernamentales; y para Weber se caracterizan como políticos profesionales.

Ellos se caracterizan justamente por la esfera que separa al funcionario patrimonial del puro burócrata conforme definición de Max Weber. Para el funcionario patrimonial, la propia gestión política se presenta como asunto de interés particular; las funciones, los empleos y los beneficios que obtiene de ellos se relacionan a derechos personales del funcionario y no a intereses objetivos como sucede en el verdadero Estado burocrático, en que prevalecen la especialización de la función y el esfuerzo por asegurar garantías jurídicas a los ciudadanos (Holanda, 1995: 145-146).

Quien vive para la política hace de ello su vida en un sentido íntimo; o goza simplemente con el ejercicio del poder que posee (...) sus ingresos no han de depender del hecho de que él consagre a obtenerlos todo o una parte importante de su trabajo personal y de sus pensamientos (...) Esto es al menos lo que sucede en circunstancias normales. El político profesional que vive de la política puede ser un puro prebendado o un funcionario a sueldo

<sup>12</sup> Se refiere a aquellas responsabilidades que encuentran en la norma la actualización de su pretensión universalista, volcada al interés general.

<sup>13</sup> Esto es, gobernadores, secretarios de estado, directores, jefes y coordinadores responsables por el ordenamiento y control de gastos, y ejecución, de proyectos y servicios.

(...) puede asumir el carácter de un empresario (...) que considera sus gastos como una inversión de capital a la que hará producir beneficios utilizando sus influencias (...) con el ascenso del funcionariado profesional se opera también (...) la evolución de los políticos dirigentes (Weber, 2007 [1919]: 7-8).

Los pensamientos de Weber (1999 [1922]) y Holanda (1995) establecen esa contraposición entre la noción de funcionario patrimonial y la de puro burócrata; el primero relaciona el funcionario patrimonial a los desvíos de funciones públicas que, entre otros motivos, serían producidos por el predominio constante de voluntades particulares. El último la asocia a la posible existencia de un tipo ideal o verdadero de Estado burocrático, aunque cabe señalar nuestra comprensión de los tipos ideales como modelos formados por investigaciones de cuño histórico.<sup>14</sup>

En nuestro caso, entendiendo el espacio burocrático en Chatterjee,

Los grupos que actúan en la sociedad política están obligados a encontrar su camino a través de ese terreno irregular, construyendo redes de conexiones externas, con otros colectivos en situaciones similares, con grupos más privilegiados e influyentes, con funcionarios gubernamentales (2008: 199).

De este modo, ese terreno irregular es atravesado por redes de conexiones, internas y externas, repletas de disputas y alianzas que, dentro de la experiencia analizada, parecían convertirse en la base de mantenimiento del dominio político sobre el aparato estatal. Fue necesario entonces dividir el análisis sobre el espacio institucional aquí delimitado, considerando dos pautas: el período político (guiado por los rituales electorales) y la política, que se hace todo el tiempo (enfocada en las decisiones o acciones paralelas que penetran e influyen el espacio y las actividades administrativas).

Las pautas anteriormente señaladas son presentadas como subdivisiones categóricas que destacan ciertas dinámicas de poder; no se ha pretendido aislar sus significados al momento en que ocurren, sino conectar sus manifestaciones al momento gubernativo que las antecede y las sucede. Así, cabe destacar que dentro de la experiencia institucional alcanzada en este estudio, los actos formales “administrativos”<sup>15</sup> y las conductas informales (aparato e intervenciones políticas) estaban conectados a un ordenamiento gubernativo único, comandado por las élites públicas (gobernantes), siendo éstas las controladoras de las acciones decisorias, vinculadas a los contratos celebrados y a recursos destinados a las OSS para la administración de las unidades sanitarias.

Esta era una temática recurrente y que resultaba en muchas contiendas entre el equipo de las Organizaciones Sociales y del gobierno, ya que necesitábamos mantener un padrón cualitativo mínimo de atención y para eso los hospitales necesitaban de personas con capacidad técnica comprobada para la ejecución de los servicios, al contrario de la simple recomendación política, ya que la contratación basada en recomendación política perjudicaba el regular funcionamiento de los hospitales, en la medida en que muchos eran contratados sin ninguna evaluación previa basada en criterios técnicos que demostrase un mejor padrón de atención en las unidades administradas (transcripción de video - anexo de la delación premiada de NE1).

Así, los objetivos y decisiones políticas (basados en alianzas privadas para fines electorales), eran percibidos como acomodados a la rutina ejecutiva/burocrática (ejecución del presupuesto recibido del Estado y realización de gastos). De tal evidencia, se considera que los actos o decisiones políticas suplantaban los actos de gestión dentro del período administrativo; cuando eso pasaba, existía un esfuerzo constante de encubrimiento, buscando ocultar esta relación, en los discursos y en los procesos de realización de gastos; también en los

<sup>14</sup> Cabe resaltar que no queremos aquí buscar amparo teórico en tipos ideales, convirtiéndolos en herramientas de análisis verificables históricamente.

<sup>15</sup> En lo que concierne a la noción de acto administrativo, tomaremos como referencia la definición dada por Carvalho Filho (2020); entendemos éste como la acción que comporta la exteriorización de la voluntad de los agentes de la administración o de sus delegados (...) con el fin de atender al interés público.

mecanismos de transparencia (manipulados o bajo mando de la élite gubernativa). Con lo cual, cualquier alianza o beneficio particular, incluso las consecuentes pérdidas de resultados (no alcance de metas e indicadores pactados), cuando existían, como mínimo, debían ser ocultados.

Para posibilitar el control sobre los recursos que serían recibidos y también para controlar el flujo de pagos, dando a este un ropaje legal, creamos la empresa BTPJ y con ella firmamos un contrato de consultoría y cooperación técnica con la OS1. Entre otras peculiaridades definidas en las cláusulas del contrato firmado entre la BTPJ<sup>16</sup> y la OS1, éste nos permitiría acceder a las cuentas bancarias movidas por la OS1 en el Estado de XZ. En paralelo monté un equipo técnico para preparar un análisis del coste de la gestión del hospital HTS y en seguida fue presentado al exgobernador EG1 (transcripción de video - anexo de la delación premiada de NE1)

A partir del ámbito hasta aquí presentado, las discusiones que siguen procuran reunir datos asociados al campo y testimonios considerados pertinentes para la exposición aquí planteada; para que, al relacionar las nociones o categorías ya presentadas con los datos y testimonios reflejados, se puedan alcanzar y presentar los análisis descritos y los aspectos conclusivos expresados en la parte final del artículo.

### **El tiempo de la política en el cotidiano de los hospitales**

A partir de criterios anteriormente definidos –y recordando que la experiencia etnográfica fue realizada en un momento de competición electoral y de sucesión de gobierno; entre el último semestre del gobierno de “EG1” (20X5) y los primeros siete meses del gobierno del sucesor GS2” (20X6)– tomaremos como primera pauta las dinámicas electorales observadas en el intervalo descrito. Cabe recordar que adoptan aquí el nombre dado por Palmeira y Heredia (2010) sobre el “tiempo de la política”; durante este tiempo, piensan los autores, que un conjunto de nuevas actividades percibidas como propiamente políticas pasan a ser incluidas o circunscritas en el cotidiano social:

La política aparece con las elecciones. Y aparece subvirtiendo el cotidiano. El inicio de las campañas electorales acrecienta a las actividades habituales otras tantas actividades (...) acceder a los comités electorales; buscar donaciones (que, en este período se intensifican) o favores (...) Durante el tiempo de la política, las facciones políticas que en el día a día se disuelven en múltiples redes de relaciones personales, se muestran por entero y ganan existencia a los ojos de los miembros de aquella sociedad (Palmeira & Heredia, 2010: 28).

En esa primera posibilidad, aunque considerando el tiempo reglamentario determinado por la justicia electoral de Brasil, lo que estuvo en evidencia fueron los arreglos que atraviesan el espacio gubernativo (apoyados en viejas alianzas formadas antes, ajustadas durante; y nuevos acuerdos comprometidos para después del proceso de competición por una vacante o cupo en la representación gubernativa). Por ejemplo: alianzas con autoridades gubernativas y candidatos de la misma base; acuerdos con empresarios; apoyos de electores y empleados obligados a colaborar o a fidelizar votos. Estos hechos ocurren a pesar de que la normativa electoral impone límites, imposibilitando determinadas conductas o tipos de alianzas (buscando crear un espacio de competición “saludable y justo”).

El cruce de la referida frontera (los acuerdos informales que surgen de la desconsideración de los límites impuestos por las leyes electorales), además de surgir a menudo, muchas veces será considerado como legítimo, aunque la ley diga lo contrario, y serán capaces de influenciar de forma decisiva el juego electoral. Este tipo de juego aproxima el tiempo de la política a la máxima brasileña, “¡en la política vale todo, sólo no vale perder!”.

<sup>16</sup> Nombre ficticio de la empresa.

Era “NA6” quien concentraba los pedidos de vacantes que provenían de los políticos de la base, yo de manera general buscaba no figurar para esta gente, incluso por indicación de EG1 (...). Los puestos de coordinación son destinados a personas recomendadas por el gobierno o por alguien de la lista de pedidos de los diputados (enviada por NE6) (transcripción de video – anexo de la delación premiada de NE1 realizada al MP en 20X6).

En tal sentido, además del texto previsto en los capítulos IV y V de la Constitución brasileña (1988), en los términos de ley, el ciclo electoral brasileño tiene un período reglamentado por ley electoral específica (ley 9.504/17, artículos del 1° al 4°) y un intervalo de tiempo demarcado para que se cumplan los rituales partidarios previos (artículo 8° de la misma ley), candidaturas (artículo 11°), y campañas; tal momento viene cargado de tensión; el propósito es garantizar el éxito de la elección (tomar el mando o mantenerse en el poder).

En de la experiencia de campo observada, y en el tiempo de la política aquí reflejado, nuevos rituales eran visibles en el cotidiano administrativo de las instituciones y sectores públicos a los que tuvimos acceso, tanto en la DAFH, como en otros sectores de la Secretaría de Sanidad y de las unidades sanitarias administradas por la OSS:

– (OP: observador participante) ¿Cómo se da cuenta de que ha llegado el tiempo de la política en la Institución o cotidiano dónde trabajas?

–No sé si va a pasar con esta nueva gestión, pero en los últimos 15 años siempre ha sido así, un poco antes del inicio de la campaña, este hospital parecía un hormiguero; muchas caras nuevas, personas recomendadas por tal o cual político, ellos enviaban personas y éstas no tenían ningún compromiso con las labores del hospital (g1; conversación informal en campo).

Acudir al comité electoral, participar de los eventos y reuniones políticas del candidato del partido del gobierno o del diputado apoyado por la cúpula administrativa (por directores de las unidades o secretarios de Estado) eran eventos que no solían ser negociables. Era el momento de demostrar fidelidad a la persona o agente político que te consiguió un puesto de trabajo, del cual recibes tu sueldo mensualmente, pensado a través de Mauss (1979 [1936]) como la negación de la devolución del contra-don.

–Cada dos años pasa siempre lo mismo, da igual si son elecciones estatales o municipales, basta apenas que sea un candidato apoyado por el grupo del gobierno, siempre existe la indicación de colaborar, por no decir, la obligación de votar.

–(OP) ¿Y en cuanto a los eventos de campaña?

–Yo siempre digo que a mí no me manden para eso de sostener banderas o entregar papeles, eso no, pero a los eventos mayores sí, odio, es molesto, pero voy y me quedo un rato, apenas para hacer número (f8: conversación informal en campo).

Las declaraciones de g1 y f8 reflejan el ambiente del tiempo de la política, cargado de rituales en el entorno de la búsqueda de adhesiones, acuerdos e intercambios. Inclusive, había casos en que se llamaba a los empleados que habían estado en el comité de campaña, o en las marchas:

–(OP) *Tu pareja trabaja en otra unidad, ¿verdad?, ¿él te contó algo sobre esas presiones?*

–Lo mismo pasa con él, allí no permiten que nadie falte a nada, especialmente a los eventos más grandes, por ejemplo, tendrá que ir a la marcha pasado mañana, incluso escuchó en su sector que habrá una llamada para comprobar los que van a estar, ¡ya te digo, una tremenda presión! (f10. conversación informal en campo).

Incluso en las caravanas de automóviles, se controlaba la matrícula de los vehículos y se verificaba si los que debían apoyar habían estado allí.

Salía de una reunión y llegaba al salón donde ya estaban reunidos gerentes de la SS y de agentes de mi sector han ido hablar de la caravana<sup>17</sup> que ocurrirá el próximo domingo, querían saber quiénes de nosotros participará, además, dijeron que deberíamos invitar a nuestros familiares o amigos que tienen coches, también dijeron que dejarían una lista y que nosotros deberíamos apuntar nuestros nombres y los números de las matrículas de los coches (...) En el día del evento, llegando a la localidad indicada para el inicio del recorrido, encuentro allí otros colegas de mi sector, luego Marcelo<sup>18</sup> me cuestiona: “¿Ya has confirmado tu presencia?” Dije que no, luego le pregunto: “¿Tendré que hacerlo?” Mi colega dijo: “¡Ya lo creo!, ¿ves a este tipo con gorra roja?, dile tu nombre y el número del coche que has apuntado en la lista” (f5: conversación informal en campo).

Los empleados de todos los niveles eran impulsados a ayudar en la campaña; las actividades que cumplían eran variadas y las funciones desarrolladas eran proporcionales al rango del cargo que ocupaban, al beneficio que recibían o al vínculo personal/de intimidad con la elite administrativa (Secretaría de Estado y directores de unidades) u otros agentes de la cúpula política. Esto pone en evidencia las tensiones generadas en el propósito de garantizar el éxito de la elección.

Hasta los agentes directivos y gerentes/coordinadores administrativos (g) se convertían en coordinadores de campañas, responsables por recaudar votos, establecer acuerdos con líderes comunitarios, presidentes de asociaciones u otros actores. Los empleados de más bajo rango (f), incluso, podían ser relevados de sus funciones antes del horario normal, cuando se juzgaba más importante que acudieran a eventos o movimientos político-electorales. Había que colaborar, estando allí, por ejemplo, en la comunidad, haciendo campaña o para juntar más personas al evento: no está bien visto rechazar una “invitación” a colaborar.

En el tiempo de la política, las presiones, incluso intimidaciones, especialmente hacia los empleados más vulnerables (técnicos contratados y comisionados de bajo rango), se convirtieron en un hecho bastante común vivido en el ambiente laboral de las organizaciones estudiadas; aunque solían estar disfrazadas de convites a colaborar con la campaña; no sólo con el voto, sino también acudiendo a los comités, marchas, caminatas por los barrios, reuniones o fiestas en los barrios marginales.

Primero deciden sus apoyos, luego necesitan estar seguros si votaremos en sus candidatos. En esta última campaña nos entregaron un papel con cuatro nombres de diputados para escoger, podíamos votar en cualquiera de la lista. Ya el voto para gobernador lo tienen por seguro en sus cabezas, creen que votaremos en el candidato del gobierno, no suelen cuestionar mucho (f9: conversación informal en campo).

En el sector DAFH, el anuncio oficial del tiempo de la política se dio con el mensaje de Germano, considerando que a éste le habían encargado verificar y listar a los empleados de su área de trabajo que se anotarían para los movimientos de la campaña electoral que había comenzado, sugiriéndose firmar una lista que le habían pasado e indicar allí el sector de la ciudad en que cada uno vivía:

¡Miren, chicos! Me siento un poco incómodo en anunciarles esto, pero los jefes me han encargado de recoger y organizar la lista de personas de nuestro sector que van a colaborar con la campaña electoral del candidato del partido de gobierno, aquí les dejo para que pongan sus datos (nombre y barrio), a más tardar mañana necesito entregar la lista a los que me han asignado esta función (...) Sobre el tipo de colaboración, lo que me han anticipado ha sido que, además de la participación en los grandes eventos (especialmente los actos), es importante también ir a las marchas de campaña (...) Repito que eso de la lista sería para que organicen nuestra participación; por eso,

<sup>17</sup> Desfile en autos, a bocinazos, en apoyo al candidato del gobierno, la expresión original en portugués es “carreata”: traducción libre del autor.

<sup>18</sup> Considerando la necesidad de sigilo de las fuentes, he cambiado el nombre original.

delante del nombre es importante que indiquemos la zona o comunidad donde residimos, para que nos asignen a los eventos políticos más cercanos, para que sea más sencillo ajustarnos a eso (g2; conversación informal en campo).

Ante el doble papel que yo cumplía (profesional y etnográfico), en el transcurso de los días fui conversando con algunos empleados del sector DAFH sobre el significado de las invitaciones para colaborar que, al parecer, comenzarían a intensificarse por aquellas fechas. Quería entender, a través de sus reportes, considerando los vínculos de trabajo, qué significado tenía esa lista de colaboración en la campaña electoral.

Camila dijo que “esta lista servía para presionar y tal imposición recaía especialmente sobre las espaldas de los que tenían vínculos o tipos de contratos más vulnerables (...) yo lo entiendo como un acoso, en el sentido de que aceptemos las funciones extras de apoyo a las agendas de campaña” (f6: conversación informal en campo).

A su turno, Rafael dijo: “¡Creo que sirve para presionar! ¡El otro día nos pusieron a mí y mi esposa para entregar material en el semáforo más cerca de la Secretaría!, ¿a ti nunca te pidieron eso?” (f4: conversación informal en campo). Respondí que eso no, pero luego repliqué: “Pero seguro que para algo me van a llamar” (risas).

Las situaciones descritas a través de los testimonios anteriores nos hacen recordar diversas nociones centrales discutidas anteriormente: sobre el dominio político impregnado en las relaciones institucionales y que pasó a ser manifestado en período electoral como sanción sobre los vínculos laborales más frágiles; sobre la apropiación privada de la cosa pública<sup>19</sup> que, discutidas a la luz de Faoro (2001) y Holanda (1995), nos hacen pensar en que están fundamentadas en relaciones patrimonialistas. Es decir, sobre el apoderamiento de las vacantes públicas como elementos de intercambios privados que, si se reflexionan a partir de Mauss (1979 [1936]), nos permiten afirmar que estimulan sanciones, con relación a la generación de obligaciones de retribuir por los beneficios recibidos.

La contraposición entre lo administrativo y lo político (discutida también mediante la dualidad entre público y privado, interés general e interés privado, formal e informal), a la luz de Weber (2007 [1919]), adquiere el sentido de la oposición descrita por el autor al discutir la noción de política como práctica profesional o vocacional. En el quehacer institucional vivenciado, el agente público se chocaba con los dos caminos apuntados por Weber: el de asumir la responsabilidad y la ética (volcar las acciones y decisiones al interés general o al servicio del bien común); y el de vivir de la política (hacer de la política una fuente de ingresos duraderos para su persona).

Aunque la experiencia de campo era conducida –en parte– por el sentido dado por Weber (2007 [1919]) a vivir de la política, la mayor parte de los servidores involucrados no parecían sacar beneficios directos, más allá de sus sueldos mensuales, o no revelaban ser conscientes de ciclos de irregularidades burocráticas o desvíos asociados a sus labores. Lo que en gran medida revelaban era la comprensión de estar siendo sometidos a la imposibilidad de realizar sus labores de forma autónoma, o incluso, a la necesidad de omitirse de algunas responsabilidades, no posicionarse o callarse ante algunas rutinas observadas, justificando la necesidad de manutención del vínculo profesional.

En la iniciativa pública existen jefes, órdenes y mordazas, no cumplir sus determinaciones, ver, cuestionar y hablar demasiado, significa ir a la calle, despido seguro (f1, conversación informal en campo).

Dije que en la gestión anterior no estaba en ese puesto, no podía afirmar si había pasado o no cosas así, no sabía nada de eso y que no consideraba la posibilidad de acuerdos más allá de las formalidades previstas en el contrato de gestión, ¡con nadie!, pero siguieron presionando y salieron enfadados a punto de decir que si no atendiésemos el pedido iban a echarnos de allí de alguna manera, iban a mover algunos hilos en el Estado. Fueron claros y enfáticos, dijeron: o están con nosotros o contra nosotros (D2: charla realizada en campo con un coordinador de la OS2).

<sup>19</sup> Me refiero especialmente a estructura, recursos y vacantes.

Dentro del dominio político allí instaurado, la élite gubernativa establecía su poder a partir del control y distribución (por indicación política) de puestos de trabajo disponibles en las unidades de salud administradas por las OSS; en el cual, dichas vacantes eran repartidas por rango político (diputados, alcaldes y concejales) y apoyaba parte de la base electoral del líder del gobierno y sus aliados.

Los profesionales vinculados al partido de oposición eran inmediatamente destituidos, bastando para ello una simple sospecha. A menudo los coordinadores de recursos humanos de los hospitales me comunicaban del recibimiento de órdenes para despedir a personas que aparecían en las redes sociales con fotos asociadas al partido de oposición. Los coordinadores de recursos humanos de las OSS eran obligados a enviar a la jefa de la casa civil del Estado informaciones periódicas sobre las vacantes existentes, seguido de la lista de los pedidos de destitución de empleados. No existían criterios de calidad y calificación técnica para las contrataciones de los empleados, el criterio era político, lo que comprometía, de sobremanera, las actividades de las unidades y los servicios ofrecidos (transcripción de video – anexo de la delación premiada de NE1 realizada en 20X6).

A partir de los testimonios presentados, puede decirse que el tiempo de la política se conecta al tiempo gubernativo y convierte el espacio institucional en un ambiente cuyos vínculos eran transformados en dispositivos de intercambio: por un lado, representados y accionados por la cúpula administrativa (titular/donadora de cargos o beneficios públicos); y por otro lado, representado por los empleados que en un momento anterior habían recibido dichas vacantes o “favores” (inducidos a retribuir y garantizar la continuidad, y el futuro, del vínculo laboral).

Estar ahí, ocupar dichos puestos, implicaba la obligación de retribuir; pero no me refiero al tipo de respuestas relacionadas con las rutinas técnicas/burocráticas de la institución, sino que eran obligaciones o “invitaciones para colaborar” que respondían a presiones, pedidos y alianzas políticas, por caso, la presencia en los eventos políticos, la colaboración con las campañas y, sobre todo, los votos.

En Weber (2007 [1919]), el poder se manifiesta justo en ese momento en que se concretiza la posibilidad de ejercer la voluntad propia sobre la de otros; cuando se domina, en el momento en que existe un mandato, una orden, una coacción. Se manifiesta, por ejemplo, en la división de ciudadanos con derecho a voto en elementos políticamente activos y pasivos (que aquí asumen las categorías de empleados invitados o presionados a contribuir, o a seguir sus indicaciones electorales) y a través de esa estratagema se busca conseguir la victoria electoral o la manutención del poder del jefe.

Así como pasa con la estructura material, con los recursos financieros, decisiones acerca de los servicios que podrían ser ofertados, dentro de la lógica renovada de reproducción del poder político y apoderamiento patrimonialista ya discutidos a través de los autores anteriormente citados. Incluso la estructura de los recursos humanos (los cargos, vacantes y los agentes/servidores que los ocupan) deja de asumir su significado público volcado al interés general, pasando a adoptar una dirección de la posesión privada (quedando a disposición y bajo la manipulación de la élite que la administra y de ahí saca beneficios privados y/o políticos).

Sobre las espaldas de los servidores comisionados y de los contratados vía OSS, conforme revelado a través de sus testimonios, ese dominio se apoya en la fragilidad de los vínculos laborales más vulnerables. En el caso de los servidores efectivos (nombrados), cuando accionado, dicho dominio se ampara en las garantías ofrecidas en el entorno de bonificaciones salariales, en este último caso, muchas de las alianzas eran potencializadas por la posibilidad de oferta, recibimiento y/o mantención de las gratificaciones.

-(OP)¿Y sobre la participación en los eventos de campaña?

-En mi entorno nos obligan a ir a todo, no hay cómo fugarse, habrá una persona responsable que indicará al jefe quién ha estado o no, sacan fotos para registrar, queda comprobado (...) En el caso de la campaña anterior para la alcaldía me sentía un poco obligada a estar el algún evento por cuenta de mi bonificación (f9: conversación informal en campo).

-Yo siento que el período electoral tensiona las relaciones de trabajo, tanto en el sentido interpersonal, cuanto las propias actividades desarrolladas y con la incertidumbre de un futuro laboral (...) noto que surgen algunas articulaciones de parte de algunas personas, que favor de intereses personales, surgiendo abordajes más o menos sutiles de los superiores para lograr conseguir votos para sus respectivos candidatos. Además, se vuelven muy evidentes los apoyos de los servidores al candidato del partido de gobierno, incluso llegan a pedir que hablemos con familiares para convencerlos a votar a sus candidatos, así, su victoria va a asegurar nuestra permanencia en el cargo, creo que es así que funciona, es así que la cosa va manteniéndose, porque hay un número muy grande de votos basado en esta cuestión de mantener los cargos públicos, comisionados incluso los trabajadores contratados (f12, conversación informal en campo).

El resultado, de acuerdo a las prácticas analizadas, es el flagrante uso del aparato burocrático de la administración pública en beneficio del candidato del gobierno y/o de sus apoyadores, problematizando así el requisito de igualdad de condiciones en la contienda electoral, en este caso, asociado al uso y concesión de empleados para lograr beneficios en la campaña.

### **Dominio y acciones que conectan la política al cotidiano de la administración contratada con OSS**

Conforme hemos definido anteriormente, tomaremos como segunda pauta de discusión la política que se hace todo el tiempo, es decir, aquella que penetra el tiempo de administrar (las manifestaciones que preceden y suceden al momento electoral pero que en la misma medida están relacionadas con la manutención del dominio político); se apodera de la estructura institucional; influencia en las decisiones e impacta en los resultados de la gestión. Se destaca aquí el dominio, asignación y ejecución del presupuesto destinado a la ejecución de los servicios sanitarios.

A partir de la vivencia en campo y lo datos a los que tuve acceso, considero que, además de los hechos referidos en el apartado anterior, fue posible observar otros tipos de interferencias políticas en el espacio –e intervalo gubernativo– investigado, ya descrito anteriormente como el intervalo ocurrido entre el último semestre del gobierno de “EG1” (20X5) a los primeros siete meses del gobierno de su sucesor “GS2” (20X6).

Sin embargo, en el caso estudiado, el cambio de dirigente (jefe de Estado) no supuso una mudanza de direccionamiento político y administrativo para el modelo de gestión contratada que fuera implantada ya en el inicio del gobierno de EG1<sup>20</sup>, dado que, además de asumir los mismos compromisos administrativos y políticos del gestor anterior, “GS2” mantuvo también la mayor parte del equipo de gobierno de su antecesor y soporte de campaña.

Conforme podemos comprobar a través de los pronunciamientos públicos de GS2 realizados en el periodo de investidura de su gobierno, “seguiremos avanzando con todo lo que hemos logrado en la gestión anterior”,<sup>21</sup> “se trata de un equipo que jugó muy bien bajo el comando de EG1 y trajo buenos resultados al desarrollo del Estado”.<sup>22</sup>

20 Ocho años consecutivos de gobierno: cuatro, seguidos de otros cuatro, asociados a una reelección.

21 Dato del cuaderno de notas: apuntes sobre el acto y discurso de investidura del gobierno de GS2 (enero de 20X6).

22 Dato del cuaderno de notas: pronunciamiento de EG2 y anuncio de nombres que van a componer su gobierno, transmisión en directo en sus redes sociales (diciembre de 20X5).



EL gobierno GS2 era una continuidad de la gestión de EG1 y mi relación con los dos era basada en intercambios, efectivamente (...) las concesiones de los contratos de gestión representaban ajustes” (*devoluciones*) (transcripción de video – anexo de la delación premiada de NE1 realizada en 20X6. La itálica me pertenece).

En el sector y espacio institucional que pudimos acceder, en los intervalos de los gobiernos citados, los agentes públicos subordinados estaban condicionados al cumplimiento del mismo modelo de rutina administrativa, restringidos por actos administrativos que limitaban la actuación de la Comisión DAFH. Tales arbitrajes provenían especialmente de líderes administrativos de dos Secretarías externas (S3 y S4), pero cuyas decisiones eran asumidas en la SS como determinaciones a ser cumplidas, que parecían estar enlazadas a una estrecha red de decisiones políticas acordadas entre líderes del gobierno y las OSS. Esas alianzas/intercambios políticos aparentemente ocultados (dramatizados) estaban presentes en la misma temporalidad gubernativa: “no existe eso de decisión A o B más o menos correcta a ser considerada, lo que existe es un proyecto de gobierno al que debemos ser fieles” (S4).<sup>23</sup>

Durante todo el período de gestión del hospital HTS tuve diversas reuniones con el exgobernador EG1, con sus secretarios de administración y salud del estado, entre otros secretarios y élites del gobierno, en el sentido de establecer una relación de confianza mutua que perduró hasta la deflagración de la operación del ministerio público. En esa época comencé a comprender cómo funcionaba la estructura del gobierno de EG1 y a estar en contacto con personas de su confianza para tratar determinados temas de interés del proyecto. Fácilmente me di cuenta que todos se reportaban a la secretaría de administración S3, siendo esta representante fiel de los intereses ocultos del exgobernador EG1 y de los intereses ilícitos de su proyecto político, entre otros, el de elegir GS2 como su sucesor para el gobierno del Estado. Además, supe que el secretario de salud (en ese momento, S4) y el procurador P1 también eran personas de confianza de EG1, actuaban en la misma línea de ilicitudes practicadas por la secretaria S3 (nota: transcripción de video – anexo de la delación premiada de NE1).

Tal situación se consolidó como práctica de gobierno durante la gestión de EG1, convirtiéndose en modelo de fortalecimiento de alianzas, establecimiento de apoyos y recaudación de recursos para fines políticos (financiamiento de campañas del sucesor GS2 y de políticos de la base aliada en el tiempo de la política). Esas prácticas perduraron hasta el estallido de la investigación criminal<sup>24</sup> que el Ministerio Público llevaba a cabo de manera secreta, en la cual, promotores del Grupo de Combate al Crimen Organizado y a la Corrupción (GCCO)<sup>25</sup> de dos Estados Federativos de Brasil, detectaron una red de actuación política cuyo escenario apuntaba a “la criminalidad institucionalizada de desviar los recursos públicos de la salud”.<sup>26</sup>

El Ministerio Público dividió a los agentes públicos, políticos y privados, que estuvieron implicados en las actividades paralelas de desvíos de recursos de la salud en cinco núcleos: núcleo político (NP); núcleo administrativo (NA); núcleo operativo y financiero (NOF); núcleo económico (NE); y miembros de las OSS. En la denuncia mencionada, el Ministerio Público citó hechos y agentes implicados en esquemas que envolvían a las cuatro Organizaciones Sociales contratadas para la gestión de hospitales en el Estado: OS1, OS2, OS3 y OS4. Una amplia red de agentes fue citada, tanto en el documento principal de la “denuncia del MP”, como en los anexos y videos de las delaciones premiadas de NE1 y S3, asociados al mismo proceso criminal. Una significativa lista que incluye desde políticos y familiares, miembros de la cúpula del gobierno y de organismos externos de fiscalía, empresarios, pero también personas asociadas a las funciones de coordinación y dirección de las OSS.

23 Nota del cuaderno de campo: comentario de S4 durante una reunión de trabajo.

24 Detención de integrantes del gobierno y divulgación mediática

25 Considerando la necesidad de sigilo de las fuentes, no hemos utilizado la sigla original.

26 Cita de la Investigación Criminal Operación XX, nº xx, ya citada en la metodología: buscando mantener el sigilo de las fuentes, evitamos citar el número del proceso criminal impetrado por el Ministerio Público de Brasil.

Constan, en el contenido de la denuncia, los nombres y hechos que más se destacaron, relacionados a la manutención de una red de intercambios de beneficios públicos, favores políticos y reparto de recursos desviados de los contratos de gestión que estaban destinados a la administración de unidades y servicios sanitarios.

De parte del gobierno, los recaudadores de sobornos que yo sabía eran S3 y el “hermano de EG1”.<sup>27</sup> De parte de las empresas, los recaudadores eran varios, uno de los principales era PJ1, ya que él representaba varias grandes empresas y concentraba gran parte de las recaudaciones de sobornos de los contratos de empresas en el área de la salud; el propio S4 a través de sus colaboradores recaudaba valores desviados de contratos con empresas pantallas y de otras empresas prestadoras de servicios laboratoriales, tanto en el HMM cuanto en el HTM (transcripción de video – anexo de la delación premiada de NE1 realizada en 20X6).

Los agentes mencionados fueron identificados según los códigos presentados: para la cúpula (ex<sup>28</sup> y actual<sup>29</sup> presidentes del gobierno, secretarios de estado<sup>30</sup> y directivos de las OSS<sup>31</sup>), los situados en posiciones intermedias (“g”: gerentes ejecutivos, coordinadores de sectores estratégicos) y el personal funcional subordinado/gobernado (“t”: servidores en general). No obstante, todos ellos han estado actuando conscientemente o sometidos, en el caso de éstos últimos, a las determinaciones derivadas de un doble dominio: por un lado, la acción administrativa/burocrática; y, por otro, en su paralelo, la acción política (ocultada cuanto más bajo fuese el rango del vínculo funcional).

Recibimos una amenaza sobre el futuro del contrato firmado para la gestión del HMM, me refiero a la presión de un grupo comandado por el líder político del municipio en donde está ubicado el hospital. El grupo se denomina aliado del gobierno y pedía que estableciésemos una alianza; en otras palabras, pedía una colaboración. Según relato del líder, en la gestión anterior, ellos recibían algunas colaboraciones. O sea, pedían algo cercano, justificando que sería para el fortalecimiento de las alianzas políticas del diputado que luchaba por los intereses del municipio y para estas elecciones necesitaban fortalecer las bases de la campaña en curso (D2: charla realizada en campo con un director de la OS2).

La agencia administrativa, aquí denominada “facción”,<sup>32</sup> quedaba así a disposición de las deliberaciones alineadas con el poder político, estructurada dentro del propio organigrama gubernativo funcional (normalizado/burocrático) de la institución, legitimado en un espacio de alianzas entrelazadas en un doble espacio de actuación, administrativo y político. Bajo esta dialéctica de control, los actos emanados desde arriba (EG1 y luego su sucesor, GS2) han sido manipulados dentro del ordenamiento del plan funcional de la política pública implementada, me refiero a la gestión contratada de unidades sanitarias.

Llegamos a este estado en 20X2, estuvimos cuatro años actuando bajo las espaldas del Estado, varios contratos renovados, siempre hemos atendido a sus solicitudes, porque siempre ha sido así, desde que llegamos, tenemos que contratar los empleados que ellos indiquen o aprueben, las empresas que ellos digan que debemos contratar (...) Lo que te comento sobre el informe, primero, sobre el acúmulo de deudas fiscales indicadas allí: hemos sacrificado eso, porque el presupuesto no era suficiente, o pagábamos los impuestos o las nóminas de los empleados y los proveedores (...) Sobre los contratos de terceros cuestionados, me río al recordar que ahora se nos acusa como

27 Directamente asociado al exgobernador, conforme denuncia del MP y relatos de la denuncia de NE1, el hermano de EG1 circulaba dentro de la estructura del gobierno para defender sus intereses y los intereses de la facción.

28 “EG1”.

29 “GS2”.

30 “S3”, “S4” y “S5”.

31 “D”.

32 Por el Ministerio Público, denominada “organización delictiva”, según el proceso penal citado.

si fuésemos ladrones, pero los contratos con servicios de terceros o tenían su aprobación o eran de dominio e indicación del Estado, no hay una sola empresa que ellos no sepan del acuerdo y del valor que se paga, estas empresas que aparecen en el informe indicando sospechas de sobreprecio en la contratación. Pero siempre hubo una resistencia en cancelarlos porque de ahí salían las ganancias que eran destinadas a la campaña electoral de un diputado de la base del gobierno (...) ellos nos obligan a hacer lo que se les ocurra y ahora esa amenaza de echarnos (g3, charla con un coordinador operacional de la OS4).

Tomando el contexto de los contratos de gestión, en el pronunciamiento de investidura citado al inicio del apartado, en los discursos públicos de las élites administrativas surgen como acciones volcadas a las demandas públicas. Sin embargo, cuando se las confronta con los testimonios de los agentes subalternos vinculados a las OSS contratadas por el Estado, lo que se evidenciaba era el acomodo de decisiones políticas a las directrices administrativas que influenciaban en la manipulación de la rutina,<sup>33</sup> impactando en el resultado de la gestión.

Dentro del panorama mencionado, el equipo de la DAFH buscaba cumplir su labor técnica, como sugiere el marco legal de los contratos celebrados con las Organizaciones Sociales que actuaban en el estado elegido para la investigación, esto es, la normativa reguladora (la ley federal,<sup>34</sup> la ley estadual<sup>35</sup> de calificación).<sup>36</sup> Al momento del estudio, la Comisión trataba el seguimiento y fiscalización de contratos para administración de seis unidades sanitarias del Estado, que fueron divididas entre cuatro Organizaciones Sociales: la OS1 (administraba el HTS), la OS2 (tenía contrato para administración del HTM y HMM), la OS3 (el HMP y el HRP) y la OS4 (la UPA1). Los ítems “a” y “b” siguientes muestran algunos aspectos relacionados a los contratos celebrados con las OSS y unidades citadas:

(a) De los objetos y finalidades previstas en los contratos de gestión firmados:

- Los contratos estaban destinados a “la oferta de servicios y acciones de salud a los usuarios, obedeciendo los padrones de más alta calidad técnica soportados por una gestión hospitalaria profesionalizada, moderna, que garantice la eficiencia en la búsqueda de eficacia, resultando en mayor objetividad y economía, de forma de consolidar el papel de la institución como referencia estatal de alta, mediana y baja complejidad, mediante acuerdo con la Secretaría de Estado de Salud.
- Los objetos de los contratos se guiaban por las políticas públicas de salud adoptadas por Secretaría de Estado de Salud (SS), el Ministerio de Salud (MS); en este caso, por lo tanto, “por la propuesta de la Política Nacional de Atención Hospitalaria y de las Redes de Atención a la Salud en el gerenciamiento y operacionalización de la ejecución de las acciones y servicios de salud”.
- De manera general, los contratos describían como finalidad: “la ejecución de los servicios y acciones de salud para garantizar calidad, eficacia, eficiencia, efectividad y los resultados esperados”.

<sup>33</sup> Es el caso de la revelación anteriormente presentada de los desvíos de recursos de contratos celebrados con empresas privadas, para apoyar la campaña electoral de candidatos oficialistas en la campaña que recién había acabado.

<sup>34</sup> Ley Federal brasileña nº 9.637, del 15 de mayo de 1998.

<sup>35</sup> Una ley local y su modificatoria ha “instituido el programa de gestión pactada y dispone sobre la calificación de Organizaciones Sociales en el ámbito del estado federativo de las unidades estudiadas”.

<sup>36</sup> Tanto la ley estadual como los contratos no serán especificados, buscando así evitar asociaciones que comprometan el requisito de secreto de las fuentes en algún momento de la escrita, pero, como ya se ha dicho, de manera general, las leyes estaduais y municipales que regulan los contratos de gestión con Organizaciones Sociales en Brasil tienen su contenido basado en la ley federal ya citada.

(b) Dentro las obligaciones generales descritas en los contratos firmados por las Organizaciones Sociales de Salud (OSS):

- Las OSS deberían realizar los servicios necesarios a la ejecución de los contratos, por su cuenta y riesgo, con integral atención a las normas y directrices del Sistema Único de Salud (SUS), de la reglamentación de la de Secretaría de Estado de Sanidad, de la programación pactada integrada, de los indicadores cualitativos, de los indicadores de desempeño y de las demás exigencias establecidas en los contratos, cumpliendo las mejores prácticas y los reglamentos aplicables, la ejecución de los servicios relacionados a la actividad asistencial cuya finalidad debería ser ejecutada por la Contratada, siendo admitido la ejecución por terceros.
- Deberían, además, responsabilizarse por la gestión administrativa del hospital y asumir total responsabilidad sobre ejecución de los servicios, cumpliendo los cronogramas de las ofertas de servicios conforme lo establecido en los proyectos básicos.

Destinada a fiscalizar el cumplimiento del objeto, objetivos y obligaciones como las anteriormente presentadas, e instalada en una dependencia del edificio de la SS, la DAFH no poseía estructura<sup>37</sup> ni equipo suficiente para atender a las demandas de control, fiscalización<sup>38</sup> y “otras actividades” relacionadas a los contratos de gestión que llegaban de las OSS y se acumulaban cada mes. Semejante contexto producía un clima de agotamiento laboral en el horario de oficina y una sensación de impotencia ante el escenario observado, seguido de quejas constantes sobre las condiciones y acúmulo de trabajo:

Todos los días tengo la sensación de que estamos arando en el desierto (f1: conversación informal en campo); Siento que somos como unos mosquitos colisionando con un avión (f3; conversación informal en campo); A veces pienso que estamos intentando apagar un incendio con un vaso de agua (f6; conversación informal en campo).

Además de las carencias estructurales, especialmente relacionadas al reducido número de miembros, auxiliares técnicos e instrumentos de trabajo, otra dificultad cotidiana enfrentada por la DAFH estaba relacionada con la morosidad o falta de respuestas de las Organizaciones Sociales a los informes que el equipo lograba producir, y que eran enviados a las OSS. Por tanto, para disminuir las barreras y dar más celeridad al recibimiento de respuestas, una de las estrategias utilizadas por el equipo del DAFH fue buscar mantener una relación más cercana con dichas organizaciones, enviándoles comunicados periódicos sobre pautas urgentes, o realizando reuniones con los directores o coordinadores, administrativos, financieros o asistenciales, especialmente cuando se identificaban vulnerabilidades en la gestión de las unidades que pudiesen comprometer la asistencia.

Las visitas a las unidades (fiscalización *in loco*) se dificultaban por el acúmulo de trabajo en el horario de oficina, especialmente en el caso de los hospitales más lejanos, localizados en interior del Estado.<sup>39</sup>

¡Anteayer estuve en el Hospital HTS, no he visto cosas buenas, me han dicho incluso que faltaban materiales esenciales para la realización de algunos procedimientos, ahí estaba la chica que dice ser su informante! ¿Y yo qué?, bueno, ¡preparo mi informe, anoto los problemas, hago mi trabajo y ya te diré si van o no a solucionarlos! (f5: conversación informal en campo).

37 Los ordenadores y escritorios eran insuficientes para todo el equipo (lo que implicaba la necesidad de turnar los horarios de oficina), faltaban estanterías y también archivadores para organizar los procesos físicos de rendición de cuentas, que eran enviados mensualmente por las cuatro OSS y que se acumulaban en el reducido espacio del departamento.

38 De manera general, asociadas a los análisis de procesos de rendición de cuentas, verificación del cumplimiento de metas e indicadores asistenciales definidos en contrato, intervenciones y fiscalías *in loco*, es decir, en las unidades administradas por las OSS.

39 En este caso, al tiempo de desplazamiento se sumaba la dificultad del trámite relacionado al costeo del viaje. En la SS, cuando eran resarcidos, los valores recibidos generalmente no cubrían los gastos con estadía y viáticos de los miembros que se habían desplazado a alguna unidad del interior

Dentro de los análisis alcanzados, uno de los problemas más recurrentes estaba relacionada con las carencias observadas en los procesos financieros<sup>40</sup> y asistenciales<sup>41</sup> de rendición de cuentas. Las dificultades encontradas motivaron a los miembros de la comisión a producir un documento con carácter de manifiesto interno que fue enviado a cada OSS. Denominado “Circular”,<sup>42</sup> el documento solicitaba que todas las Organizaciones fiscalizadas por la DAFH se adecuasen a las reglas allí definidas: un nuevo modelo de rendición de cuentas, aprobado y entendido por los miembros de la comisión como un modelo más coherente y transparente de rendir cuentas de los gastos realizados; y las metas asistenciales alcanzadas. El referido documento también determinaba que la no adecuación a las nuevas reglas, plazos y formatos descritos, traería como consecuencia, la negativa de recepción, por parte de la DAFH, del proceso de rendición de cuentas mensuales, preparados y destinados por OSS, lo que podría resultar, mediante normativa estatal en vigor, en el retraso –o no envío– de la alícuota presupuestaria mensual estimada en el contrato firmado.

Sin embargo, cualquier intento de la comisión de fiscalización en el sentido de cancelar contratos de suministro de insumos o prestación de servicios bajo sospecha de sobrepuestos, era impedido. Los informes de la DAFH eran revisados para medir los impactos producidos: el proteccionismo institucional era una prioridad evidente; así, algunas veces recibimos la sugerencia de cambiar términos que aparecían en algún informe –por ejemplo, “transferencias a cuentas no identificadas”– porque, según revisores de los informes, expresiones así podrían llamar la atención del tribunal de cuentas y de los medios de comunicación.

Cuando las actividades y servicios ofertados por las OSS no alcanzaban el nivel de cumplimiento de los esquemas necesarios para impedir las quejas y pequeñas revoluciones, a los dueños del poder les quedaban otras dos opciones: establecer acuerdos con otros centros de poder, que fuesen capaces de colaborar con la resolución del problema; o calmar a los usuarios, o servidores quejosos, con discursos y promesas hasta que el orden fuese restablecido.

Como puede observarse en la nota abajo, relacionada a la observación de las negociaciones burocráticas y políticas para controlar el caos generado en dos hospitales del interior del Estado que eran administrados por la OS3:

La próxima semana ocurrirán las plenarios del presupuesto participativo en el interior del Estado; y considerando el caos imperante en dos de las principales unidades de salud del interior que son administradas por la OS3 (HGI y HMI), los coordinadores del evento pidieron providencias de parte de la Secretaría de Salud. Ellos comentaron sobre quejas de la población, descontenta con la asistencia recibida en los hospitales, y que un concejal estuvo hablando en una radio local sobre los atrasos de los salarios de servidores contratados por las OSS, también sobre la presión de líderes políticos de comunidades cercanas a los hospitales, cuya población también dependía de los servicios de estas dos unidades (...) La interrupción de los servicios estaba relacionada a la falta insumos básicos y de materiales o instrumentales médicos, pero el problema mayor, dijeron, “sería controlar las quejas de los empleados que llevaban dos meses sin recibir sus sueldos” (notas del cuaderno de campo: reunión con líderes de las SS, presentación del problema a la comisión, sobre el caos producido en dos unidades del interior del Estado).

La solución política encontrada fue decidida por los líderes del gobierno estadual, quienes enviarían un representante al municipio en que estaban ubicadas las unidades sanitarias foco del caos. La función de este visitante sería tranquilizar a los empleados y, especialmente, calmar los ánimos de los miembros de los concejos deliberantes de los municipios y otros políticos de la región, ya que éstos eran quienes estaban agitando a la población a través de las radios. Para ello, tendría que destinarse alguien con liderazgo político en la región y

40 De manera general, las carencias estaban relacionadas a la falta de organización, de transparencia de los datos o de aporte documental.

41 Casi siempre, las carencias encontradas se referían a la falta de aporte de informaciones que asegurasen el cumplimiento de los indicadores y metas asistenciales estipuladas en los contratos de gestión.

42 Oficio Circular, traducción libre del autor.

oratoria suficiente para tranquilizar a todos. El propósito de la visita sería la de anticiparse a las quejas y, en caso que el estado no lograra encontrar la solución antes del plenario del presupuesto participativo, que sería realizado allí próximamente, necesitarían como mínimo tener las respuestas correctas y saber dialogar con los usuarios y empleados enfurecidos que pudiesen acudir al evento público.

Eugenio estuvo en los municipios, hizo acuerdos y calmó a los concejales y políticos locales, también estuvo presente en el plenario que ocurrió allí días después, respondió a las principales quejas de los usuarios, les garantizó que todas las quejas serían consideradas y que los servicios serían restablecidos rápidamente, y a los empleados del hospital que estuvieron en la reunión del presupuesto participativo, Eugenio les garantizó que el Estado ya estaba tratando con la OSS que administraba las unidades en el sentido de actualizar el pago de sus salarios en los próximos días; según comentaron otros representantes del gobierno que también estuvieron allí, dijeron que Eugenio supo contestar todo y a todos, no colocando el gobierno y la gestión en mayores líos” (“c1” - notas del cuaderno de campo: intervención política y restablecimiento del orden).

Según percibía, la comisión acababa funcionando como un mecanismo utilizado por la elite gubernativa. Por un lado, por fuerza de ley; por otro, para cumplir los trámites burocráticos que la red necesitaba mantener (dentro de la conformidad que el modelo preveía). Permitir que la comisión realizara un trabajo de supervisión y resolución, con autonomía para tratar con las OSS sobre la necesidad de corrección de vulnerabilidades, revelando las debilidades del modelo de gestión, significaría ir en contra de los intereses del grupo.

## Conclusiones

De revelaciones como las encontradas entre los datos que se han escogido y logrado presentar, tras los dilemas del trabajo de campo de cuando se audita la cosa pública: cuando el auditor negocia la entrada en el campo y se convierte en etnógrafo, pasa a tratar con el análisis de contratos en el área de la oferta sanitaria pública y, consecuentemente, sobre las rutinas vinculadas a las agendas administrativas que toman cuerpo en ese contexto.

A partir de ese momento, comienza a entender que dichas rutinas también están atravesadas por conductas asociadas al manejo del poder y a propósitos políticos de la élite o grupo gubernativo que tiene el mando sobre la cosa pública. Así, vista desde dentro, la rutina gubernativa acaba convirtiéndose en un excelente *locus* para comprender los fenómenos que componen la dialéctica institucional observable dentro del encuentro entre el tiempo y espacio administrativos; el tiempo de la política y –en base a la percepción de la continuidad de las prácticas que conectan dichas temporalidades– se llega al tipo de política que se hace todo el tiempo.

Al realizar tal análisis, he querido revelar que esta misma estructura está tomada también por otros aspectos –o rituales– que no están demarcados dentro de los significados atribuidos al cumplimiento de una rutina burocrática volcada exclusivamente al interés general. Por ese motivo, me he referido a ello como enlaces informales, aun cuando, conectados a un mismo espacio deliberativo, son reproductores de un cierto tipo de poder político, cuya existencia no representa una suma de dos aspectos (uno administrativo y otro político) que se complementan y logran obtener un objetivo común. Representan, en rigor, atributos paralelos que penetran la misma rutina, pero que están configurados en el campo de las prácticas políticas y administrativas como “polos opuestos”.<sup>43</sup> Señalo que estos desvíos de niveles niegan la otra posibilidad: política *versus* administración; atención *versus* desatención normativa; público *versus* privado; desinteresado *versus* interesado; formal *versus* informal; intereses colectivos *versus* patrimonialismo.

43 Estoy pidiendo prestada la noción de Bourdieu (1982) cuando dice que el campo político tiende a organizarse en torno de la oposición entre polos.

Los testimonios indican que dentro de la subordinación a la cual estaban sometidos, la pauta burocrática atribuida al tiempo ejecutivo deja de evidenciar el cumplimiento de procesos administrativos, con sus reglas dirigidas al interés general. Por ejemplo: la calidad de la respuesta estatal a las demandas sanitarias conducidas por los agentes públicos (políticos profesionales) al servicio del Estado –colocando en práctica su discurso sobre las prioridades colectivas y responsabilidad democrática–.

En otras palabras, los procedimientos de control interno y transparencia (apropiados como componentes del espacio gubernativo) vienen dotados de instrucciones respecto de la manera cómo deben ser llevados a cabo. No obstante, el cotidiano administrativo (pensado a partir de una práctica asociada al campo de la auditoría) estaba sujeto a otro tipo de dominio, y respondía a otras directrices o prioridades tejidas en relaciones de poder y normalizadas en el cotidiano institucional.

En este estudio, el cotidiano institucional ha estado marcado por un grupo dominante, organizado e interesado en la manutención del poder; que, al lograr el control sobre la estructura del Estado, pasa a asumir la vigilancia sobre los procedimientos y a manipular instrumentos, procesos y actividades.

El tiempo gubernativo (la política que se hace todo el tiempo) se conectó, durante la investigación, al tiempo electoral, al observarse la apropiación y el desvío de recursos que el grupo en el poder hacía para financiación de sus campañas electorales y de sus apoyadores de base. De igual manera, conectó el tiempo electoral al momento administrativo subsecuente, a partir de las alianzas renovadas sin cesar, de los acuerdos y las promesas, comprometidos para la próxima gestión.

En el caso observado, así como ocurre con la estructura, los recursos y decisiones acerca de los servicios que fueron ofrecidos dentro de la lógica renovada del apoderamiento privado/político (patrimonialista) –incluso los cargos, vacantes y el plantel de servidores que los ocupan–, entran en el cálculo del margen de beneficios explotados. La dádiva pública positiva (gratuita, al servicio o a disposición del ciudadano) pasa a asumir un sentido de posesión privada, de agentes públicos que viven de la política y no para la política, bajo la disposición y manipulación de la elite que la administra, sacando tal grupo el máximo provecho de los referidos beneficios.

Esta lógica convierte la burocracia objetiva –comprendida como las intenciones administrativas de interés general volcadas a las demandas públicas y a los mecanismos de transparencia y responsabilidad democráticas– en sobras administrativas y burocráticas. La disyunción entre el marco burocrático y los actos administrativos invalidados por los intereses de grupos dominantes provoca el sobreprecio de contratos, el intercambio de los derechos ciudadanos por votos, la permuta del bienestar social y la salud por apoyos políticos o electorales.

Las redes de corruptela investigadas en las rutinas de los hospitales o unidades sanitarias de gestión contratada nos permiten pensar que, aunque haya existido la inclusión de nuevas dinámicas administrativas asociadas al aparato estatal, observamos una lógica patrimonialista, actualizando sus prácticas políticas y administrativas. Estos hechos corroboran la falta de compromiso con un tipo política y gestión, volcadas al interés general, colocando los intereses privados o políticos por encima de los intereses públicos en el campo de la administración de unidades sanitarias.

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# *Police Places:* Ethnographic Notes About Other Police Territorialities in the Suburbs of Rio de Janeiro

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## **Abstract**

One of the biggest challenges in researching the practices of any police institution is finding a place from which it is possible to ethnographically observe and thus describe them, taking into account the methodological restrictions one encounters in accessing certain dimensions of police work. Faced with this problem, the present article aims to debate what I call “police places”: an analytical category used to describe other dimensions of police territoriality in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro. Based on a description of a walk I took with a young man interested in joining the military police, I argue that the informal presence of agents in his neighborhood implies another type of spatial control. The article shows that, from the perspective of the population of these places, the police are understood to be an important “center of power” that attracts a series of young people involved in precarious contexts to the police career.

**Key words:** police, State, ethnography, methodology, place, territoriality.

# *Lugares de polícia:* notas etnográficas sobre outras territorialidades policiais no subúrbio carioca

## **Resumo**

Um dos maiores desafios em pesquisar as práticas de qualquer instituição policial é encontrar um lugar desde onde seja possível etnografá-las, levando-se em conta as restrições metodológicas encontradas para acessar certas dimensões do trabalho da polícia. Diante do problema, o presente artigo objetiva empreender um debate a partir do que denominei “lugares de polícia” – categoria analítica usada para descrever outras dimensões da territorialidade policial no subúrbio do Rio de Janeiro. A partir da descrição de um passeio que fiz ao lado de um jovem interessado em entrar para a polícia militar, argumento que a presença informal dos agentes em seu bairro implica um outro tipo de controle sobre o espaço da vizinhança. O artigo mostra que na perspectiva da população desses lugares, a polícia é compreendida enquanto importante “centro de poder” que atrai uma série de jovens inscritos em contextos de precariedade para a carreira policial.

**Palavras-chave:** polícia, Estado, etnografia, metodologia, lugar, territorialidade.

# *Police Places:* Ethnographic Notes About Other Police Territorialities in the Suburbs of Rio de Janeiro

Eduardo de Oliveira Rodrigues

## **Introduction: building other places from which conduct police ethnography**

One of the biggest challenges in conducting ethnographic investigation into the practices of any police institution is to find a place from where one can “look, listen and write” about them (Cardoso de Oliveira, 1996). A series of dimensions of police work - in particular the coexistence between agents in the *back regions* (Goffman, 1985, p. 107) of patrolling - are inaccessible to the vast majority of people who are not police officers. According to Fine and Holyfield (1996), certain communities find their elements of internal cohesion in *trust* and *secrecy*, especially when it comes to groups that carry out activities with varying levels of risk, as is the case of police forces. What an agent does or does not do on the streets, or even what he thinks beyond the stock answers he would provide in an interview, is information generally limited to his professional peers or people in his innermost circle.

These challenges become even more serious in the Brazilian context, when we take into account the low levels of “accountability” that Brazilian police have in relation to civil society (Lemgruber, Musumeci and Cano, 2003; Kant de Lima 2013; Soares, 2019). The problem becomes apparent not only in the relative scarcity of quantitative data produced by the police themselves, but also in access to this data and to the police and, mainly, in the lack of openness of corporations towards researchers interested in understanding their operation (notably through the production of qualitative analyzes). It is no coincidence that most of the themes and methodologies employed by police studies tend to favor an approach that is more focused on the institutional and normative analysis of these institutions (Nóbrega Júnior, 2018), based on the quantitative analysis of criminal statistics, as well as the use of the “interview” as a privileged form of interaction with potential interlocutors (Ribeiro and Teixeira, 2018). When compared to the growing number of ethnographies of criminal behavior (Aquino and Hirata, 2018), ethnographies dedicated to the study of the police are still quite underrepresented in published works in Brazil (Muniz, Caruso and Freitas, 2018) and worldwide (Fassin, 2017).

Given this situation, the present article presents another methodological perspective, focused on the analysis of police work on the streets, in the context of what I call *police places*. A *police place* does not have a strictly geographic meaning. Rather, as defended by Massey (1991: 28), it is a spatial cut that configures a given “constellation of social relations” through experiences shared between subjects regarding the police. In a city like Rio de Janeiro (but more specifically in its suburban regions<sup>1</sup>), the police exercise territoriality not only through their institutional presence in vehicles, police stations, or through uniformed agents on the streets, but also through the other social roles played by police officers as respectable (and feared) residents of some of neighborhoods; owners or regulars of bars, nightclubs and brothels; and employees of private security

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<sup>1</sup> This is a region that is difficult to geographically and socially delimit. The representations of the Rio suburbs presented in this article follow the most recurrent meaning of this term. They refer to a social space concentrating the experiences of the poor and peripheral neighborhoods of the city of Rio de Janeiro, which are crossed by train lines and symbolically distant from the so-called “center” of the metropolitan region. This is the meaning that informs most of the stories I had collected from the candidates, including during my transit through the *police places* that intersect the native spaces of housing, work and leisure. In any case, for a bibliographic review on the polysemy of meanings surrounding the “carioca suburb”, see Fernandes (2001) and Guimarães and Davies (2018).

companies, among other roles. Immersion in these places makes it possible to get to know some of their frequenters and the informal ways in which the presence of the police can thus be perceived that produce particular meanings regarding this dimension of police territoriality.

This unusual way of observing the Brazilian police was a consequence of the manner my face-to-face fieldwork was developed, even during my PhD (Rodrigues, 2022). For a period of just over nine uninterrupted months (June/2019 – March/2020), I accompanied hundreds of young people as they prepared for their written exams to enter into the career of Military Police “soldier” for the State of Rio de Janeiro (PMERJ)<sup>2</sup>. I was not engaging here with a group of recruits - that is, future police officers who are already enrolled in police training schools. These were young people between the age of 18 and 32 years old who had not had, up to the moment I met them, any contact formal with the police force. In carrying out my empirical fieldwork, I was initially able to participate in a “preparatory course” for the exam. The fact that I was simultaneously a geography teacher in the basic education network and, at the time, a doctoral candidate in anthropology made it possible to actively help candidates to prepare for their exams as a kind of informal “tutor”<sup>3</sup>. The study routine strengthened bonds of trust and allowed me access, in greater depth, to the social representations around what these young people understood to be the military police in Rio de Janeiro.

During the course of these preparatory classes, I developed even more intense relationships with some candidates that went beyond the confines of the classroom. I traveled through the relevant spaces of my interlocutors’ daily life, such as those connected to their places of residence, work and leisure. This led me to become aware of how the police presence usually appeared in their lives of these youth, long before they decided to try join the force, in the presence of individuals “PMs” (military policemen) they had met through kinship and neighborhood relations, friendship, and work. In places such as bars, brothels, and concert halls - but also in the daily lives of some youths in their neighborhoods during work in hospitals, garages, or informal transport vans - police territoriality was often not exercised exclusively by the social roles that the police took on during their work. In these *police places*, police were present along with said spaces residents or frequent visitors. Police presence implied some control over the local circulation flows of goods (whether material or symbolic) and of the people themselves. I want to emphasize the territorial dimensions of these social relations, since they describe attempts to “affect, influence, or control actions and interactions” through political control over a given space (Sack, 1983:55).

In general, to describe what the police do in certain places beyond the more obvious environments where they manifest, one must assume that these practices are one of the possible *effects* that are produced by or from the State, but which are not necessarily limited to the institutions formally defined as belonging to the State (Trouillot, 2001; Mitchell, 2006). This methodological effort is a possible contribution to the ethnographies

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2 Within the list of institutions that make up the Brazilian Justice System, article 144, paragraph 5 of Brazil’s Federal Constitution of 1989 states that the military police are responsible for the ostensive policing of the streets and the maintenance of public order in the 26 states of the federation and in the Federal District. This idiosyncrasy is a remnant of the period of the last Brazilian civil-military dictatorship (1964-1985), which removed these tasks from the hands of the civil police (who were given the role of the policing and investigation of criminal offenses, except for those conducted by military personnel). Roughly speaking, and mirroring the military structure, the military police are organized through the existence of two career paths within the institution. On the one hand, the highest-ranking agents are grouped within the “officer cycle”, where ranks range from first lieutenant to colonel. These positions are more focused on command functions, with higher salaries that require higher levels of education in law in order to access the career (in the case of PMERJ). Military police officers (PMs) of lower ranks, ranging from soldier to sub-lieutenant, are grouped within the “cycle of enlisted men”. These positions are more focused on patrolling and street-based activities. They have lower salaries and require medium-level training in order to access the career (again, referencing the PMERJ here). These two careers are distinct in terms of access, training paths, responsibilities, salaries, *status*, etc., which imply a series of particularities regarding the formation of the Military Police as an institution. For a better perspective on the duality of “soldiers” and “officers” within the Brazilian military police, – but with particular attention to the case of Rio de Janeiro – see the works of Muniz (1999), Poncioni (2004) and Caruso, Patricio and Pinto (2010).

3 Access to the PMERJ’s “cycle of enlisted men” takes place through a public competition and any Brazilian citizen between 18 and 32 years old who has a high school diploma and a valid National Driver’s License can compete for a vacancy. In the last two competitions (2010 and 2014), theoretical knowledge of the following disciplines was required: basic Portuguese, writing, history, geography, sociology, traffic legislation, human rights, and information technology. Once approved in this first stage of the competition, called the “intellectual exam”, candidates are then evaluated by a “psychological exam”, an “anthropometric exam”, a “Physical Aptitude Test (TAF)”, a “toxicological exam”, a “medical examination” and, finally, “social research” – an investigation into the candidates’ previous lives carried out by the PMERJ’s intelligence sector.

that investigate these institutions. It involves a shift of perspective beyond diagnoses of a more normative nature, which tend to see the Brazilian military police as institutions in permanent “crisis”. The supposed “crisis” that plagues these police institutions is mainly materialized by their negative public image (Zilli, 2017). Scholars of the topic, public policy makers, government officials, and even those police considered be “progressive” use such studies to call for changes in the police institutions (Poncioni, 2012). Since the Brazilian re-democratization process following the last dictatorship (1964-1985), some attempts at “reform” have been undertaken based on what has debated about the problems caused and faced by the military police over the last four decades. These reforms encompass a wide spectrum of measures that include initiatives such as changes in the training of agents, less belligerent public programs and policies, and attempts at greater civil control over police work, among others <sup>4</sup>.

In order to distinguish and better illustrate the methodological perspective I am proposing, the next sections of the present article will be dedicated to the examination of the possible benefits offered by *police places* through the ethnographic description of a “walk” that I took through the neighborhood of one of my main research interlocutors. Pablo is a 19-year-old young man whose life trajectory weaves together institutions such as the police and his family, since he has relatives who are “active” or “retired” PMs. Walking by his side, I listen to the narrative the candidate presents as we move through his neighborhood. Pablo describes this as a place where the police are a key element in the functioning of daily life. I intend to demonstrate that, from the point of view of my interlocutor, far from being an institution in “crisis”, the PMERJ becomes something capable of symbolically organizing native experiences, expectations, and worldviews within a universe that involves graphic stories of violence but, equally, narratives of survival and fun. Pablo is just one of many other candidates I’ve lived with who see “being policer” as not only a mechanism for social ascension through entering a public career, but also as a *police condition* (Silva, 2014:132-133), a native category used to describe the possible advantages linked to the exercise of the police profession.

In accordance with the problem suggested by the “Ethnographies of Governance Institutions” dossier, my description of that episode demonstrates how military police institutions are constituted as important *centers of power* (Geertz, 1997:187) in a society such as Brazil, when thought of from the perspective of its precarious urban populations. In the case of the PMERJ, studies such as those by Bretas (1997) and Holloway (1997) show us that, since its inception, police work has always been much more attractive to poorer and blacker workers than to wealthier social segments. This is the social profile of the majority of the troops in Rio de Janeiro up to the present day (Minayo et. al., 2008:67-71). The PMERJ, therefore, is a governance institution whose members’ profile deviates from those traditionally occupying the field of interests of an “anthropology of the elites” in both the international (Abbinck and Salverda, 2013) and Brazilian (Gomes, Motta and Souza Lima, 2021) spheres. Investigations of this institution also pose a series of methodological challenges common to “studying up” (Nader, 1972:301-308).

In fact, ethnographically studying the police in these terms - that is, understanding their fundamental role in the political administration of life in certain precarious places of a city like Rio de Janeiro - is also a way of reflecting on the possible relational character between categories such as “studying up” and “studying down”. In the reading of candidates for a police career, “being a police officer” allows one to ascend socially through the earning of unparalleled economic and reputational income within the social contexts in which these young people live: i.e regions such as the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro. Pablo is just one example within the universe of candidates who I engaged with during my fieldwork, as I will try to describe in the following sections.

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<sup>4</sup> An exhaustive review of the mapping of the debate on police studies in Brazil is beyond the scope of the present article. For more information, see the overview of the consensus and dissent of production in the field of studies on crime, police and the justice system contained in Rattón (2018). For deeper bibliographical engagement, see the surveys and systematizations made by Kant de Lima, Misse, and Miranda (2000) for works published until the early 2000s, and Campos and Alvarez (2017) for the period between 2000 and 2016.

## Suburban routes

On November 13th, 2019, a Wednesday, I headed towards Pablo's house around 4 pm. The Vasco da Gama and Flamengo football teams would face off for the return of the Brazilian Championship to Rio de Janeiro that same night. We had agreed to watch the game together through a bet: he whose team lost the duel would have to wear the shirt of the opposing team the next morning, when we would meet again in the environment of the "preparatory course", along with dozens of other young people who, like Pablo, were preparing for the next competition to become a PM. My interlocutor was very excited about his team's chances and he disturbed my patience daily with videos of goals, *memes*, and provocations in general about the antagonistic situation of the two clubs. At the time, Flamengo was coming from a series of 20 undefeated games (with an impressive 18 wins), and started towards the anticipated championship title. Vasco, on the other hand, remained around the middle of the standings, with an irregular campaign that had not managed to reach even a 50% win rate.

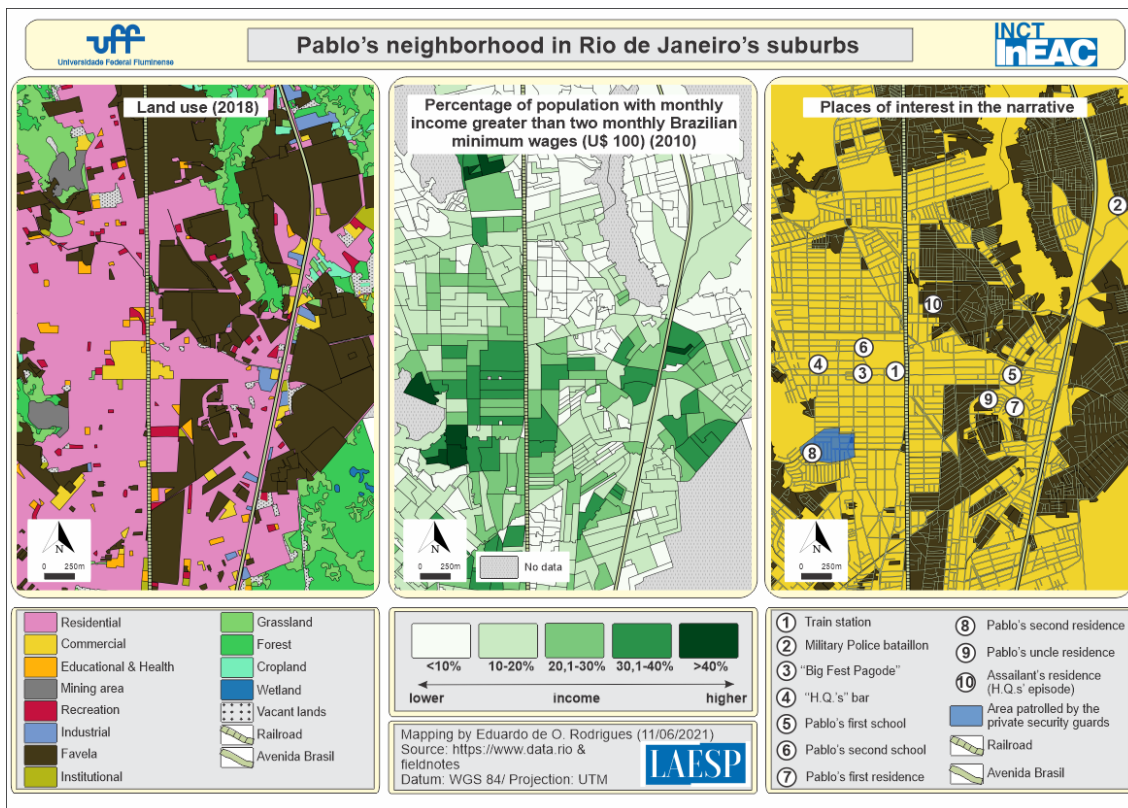
Given our mutual interest in football, Pablo invited me to watch the game with him, since he claimed to have no money to go to Maracanã. His suggestion was that we meet earlier at his house and drink a few beers, taking advantage of the fact that his parents were away. Afterwards, we would head to a nearby bar to watch the match. Agreeing, I then took an early afternoon train to avoid the "rush hour", which began after 5:00 PM as workers returned from city center to their suburban neighborhoods of residence. Standing in the train car, I looked at the map of the stations that indicated my destination. Both Pablo and I lived in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro, although our homes were approximately an hour away from each other by train.

Going along that route made it possible for me to get to better know some of the axes that gave life to those most forgotten corners of the "wonderful city" of Rio de Janeiro. In Rio, train branches and expressways provided different spatial fractures to the urban plan of the metropolis and, especially, of the suburbs. Especially in the neighborhoods crossed by trains, the railways have played an important role in the material and symbolic division of the neighborhoods, where many residents have transformed crossing the tracks via footbridges or underpasses into rituals (Lins, 2010:150-153). The landscapes that were being laid out before my eyes brought together some of these idiosyncrasies, which were verifiable by the different land uses in the mixture of houses, slums, small businesses and industries along the tracks. These last developments only remained in the landscape as empty or repurposed sheds, whose industrial activities had long ago given way to other uses. Often, industrial buildings were simply abandoned and visibly falling into ruin.

As I moved into the more distant reaches of the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro, "radinhos"<sup>5</sup> standing or sitting on improvised chairs and sofas showed the presence of illegal drug commerce along the margins of some points of the line. This was all observed through the windows of the train, where passengers already familiar with the scene were only concerned with getting home as quickly as possible. All these elements made me think about how different Pablo's suburb was from mine. It was grayer, more polluted, more impoverished and, for some, even more dangerous. However, the place held no less vitality for those reasons, as the streets that led to the train station located in the center of the neighborhood would soon show. To better situate the reader in this narrative, the description I present below can be better understood through the following maps representing Pablo's neighborhood. These show, respectively, "land uses", the socioeconomic profile of residents and "places of interest" that will appear throughout the rest of this article:

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<sup>5</sup> "Radinho" is the informal designation given to those who monitor the flow of people into and out of *favelas* territorialized by groups of illicit drug dealers in Rio de Janeiro. The name "radio" refers to the fact that these young people usually carry radio transmitters or walkie-talkies that serve for internal communication within the gang.



## Police Neighborhood

"Fuck bro, where's the shirt? Are you going to say you didn't bring it!?" Pablo asked, when he saw me leaving the station. I showed him the Maltese cross that stamped the white diagonal stripe of the Vasco shirt inside my backpack and explained that I had kept it in there shirt to "avoid trouble" with the flamenguistas on the train. Pablo didn't miss a chance to mock me: "That's right, bro. It's been embarrassing to be a Vasco fan these last few years". Jokes aside, we greeted each other and Pablo's enthusiasm for the game was quite evident.

I commented that it had been many years since I had last visited his neighborhood, since my relationship with the place was limited to an old personal bond that had ended many years ago. Pablo asked if I knew the area well, and I explained that I didn't, emphasizing that my knowledge was limited only to the surroundings of the station and the street where my ex-girlfriend lived. Upon hearing the address, he asked if she lived "on the other side of the station", which I confirmed. "Oh bro, I know the street. But here is another scene entirely: much better. Let's go to the market and on the way back I'll show you around". I agreed with the suggestion and we continued on foot in order to stock up on beers and crackers.

The market was "on the other side" of the railway line and we were forced to walk towards the station to reach the place. The area was well known to Pablo, as he and his family had also lived on that side of the neighborhood for many years during the candidate's childhood. Both sides of the neighborhood were thus Pablo's "area", or, in the terms used by Magnani (2002:21), they were his *turf* [*pedaço*]. The candidate understood the union between those two halves as a physical cut of a geographical nature, which demarcated a reasonably well-defined common territory. But he also understood the two halves equally as a part of the social order, through the way in which his own trajectory was constructed and which enabled him to establish different relationships of friendship and kinship, which filled out the contents of the space in particular ways.



This particularism was due not only to the fact that the Pablo's daily life had been created in the same neighborhood, but mainly to the role that the PMERJ played in organizing the relationships that structured this life. Throughout his childhood, Pablo's father had been full-time "enlisted"<sup>6</sup> for over a decade in the local police battalion, whose station house was on the opposite side of the rail line from where Pablo now lived. His uncle was also a PM and had lived in the neighborhood for many years, although he was assigned to another battalion in the city. The uncle's former residence was still his property, although it was occupied by his ex-wife and one of his sons who was, like his father, an "enlisted" PM. I asked if those family relationships were routine in this "area" and if "there were a lot of police"<sup>7</sup> in the neighborhood. Pablo said that not only did the police "live" there, but that the existence of a relatively high concentration of PM residences allowed the "police" to enjoy other common living spaces spread throughout the streets, corners, squares, parks, and blocks of the neighborhood.

Indeed, in analytical terms, the regularity of meetings in that suburban stronghold ended up demonstrating the high informal presence of the police as one possible reading. I emphasize the *informal* character of this presence because it does not necessarily have to do with uniformed agents in functions such as policing on foot, patrolling in vehicles, or serving the public offered by the local station house. Again, according to Magnani (2002:19), the informal presence of PMs and other police agents acted more in the sense of conforming one of the distinct *totalities*: that is, an order understood by the natives as a set of practices and daily interactions in places such as streets, housing complexes, bars, restaurants, concert halls, clubs, etc. In these spaces, PMs took on social roles as residents and regulars in addition to the functions more directly linked to the policing performed when they were on duty. It was this particular *totality* that gave the neighborhood a certain reputation as a "police neighborhood".

As we were going over the walkway across the tracks, Pablo tried to explain to me the reputation of the place as the result of elements that took shape over time. This explanation ended up intertwining some important people in his life. Right away, Pablo explained that the salary paid by the PMERJ was not enough for the agents to live in more affluent neighborhoods – especially the "enlisted". Most of the PMs he knew (whether they were family members or not) lived in that and many peripheral neighborhoods of the capital and its metropolitan area, since their networks of kinship and friendship were generally territorialized in these spaces. A second point Pablo brought up concerned the presence of a PM battalion, which had been on-going for many decades in the neighborhood. This allowed the agents stationed there to interact more with local daily life, getting to know some people better and arranging "jobs"<sup>8</sup>, wives, girlfriends, "lovers", friends, etc. Some of these PMs ended up deciding to establish their lives more fully in that place, changing their address to a residence located in the vicinity. Finally, the neighborhood still had a strong presence of "bicheiros" and their families, maintaining a series of businesses linked not only to the "jogo do bicho"<sup>9</sup> stalls, but also to the financing of Samba Schools, Carnaval street "blocos", and other commercial and service activities whose owners had a connection with these families. Pablo stated that both his father and his uncle were close to different activities linked to the "jogo do bicho" when they were "active" PMs.

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6 Being an "enlisted" – or a "praça" – is a reference to a police officer belonging to the "circle of enlisted men", as explained in footnote nº 2, regardless of rank. Roughly speaking, calling a military police officer "enlisted" means saying that he is a low-ranking police officer.

7 In everyday life in Rio, it is commonplace for people to call agents "policia" and not "policial". Both the "police" institution and its staff are therefore referred to in the same way in the Portuguese version of this text as "policia".

8 A "job" or "bico" in the military police universe means any type of informal paid activity that police officers carry out during their time off from "official" police service. On the "police bico", see Brito, Souza and Magalhães (2011).

9 The *Jogo do Bicho* is an illegal lottery betting on numbers ranging from 1 to 25, each representing a certain animal. It was created at the end of the 19th century in the city of Rio de Janeiro and later spread throughout Brazil. Although it is illegal, the lottery is still very popular among Brazilians. The nickname "bicheiro", in turn, designates the heads of the betting points of the "jogo do bicho" spread throughout the cities of the country. On the "Jogo do Bicho", see Damatta and Soárez (1999), Chazkel (2011) and Labronici (2015).

The trajectory of my interlocutor was not an isolated case in the neighborhood. Pablo remembered that some of his school classmates were also sons and daughters of PMs, or at least of other security agents and low-ranking military personnel. Other boys and girls had low-ranking enlisted military parents in the form of privates, corporals and sergeants. Pablo maintained similar relationships with friends and acquaintances on the street who had relatives, colleagues, neighbors or other close relations active in these military corporations. A significant part of all these young people were trying out for a police or military career. Pablo's own younger half-brother – from an extramarital relationship of his father's – dreamt of pursuing a career in the Rio de Janeiro Fire Department (CBMERJ). The eldest daughter from Pablo's father's first marriage was also married to another PM, who initially had shared a position in the same battalion as Pablo's father.

These stories suggest that many of the young people who inhabited a neighborhood such as the one described share common experiences linked to early contact with moral subjects close to the police universe. Besides police officers, low-ranking military personnel, firefighters, penitentiary agents, municipal guards, "militiamen"<sup>10</sup> and "bicheiros", these are also family members, friends, neighbors, and many other people close to these youth. As *youth raised up (crias)* in this universe of values these young people are subjects who build their identities around values and moralities that attribute his existence to a local circulation (Silva, 2019:68-97), Pablo and many other *crias* of the neighborhood guide their daily actions through an ethics close to that proffered by these security agents – although they were not, necessarily, policemen or any other of the subjects listed above. Although these are moralities inscribed in fundamentally *situational* contexts (Eilbaum, 2012:32), certain consensuses ended up being built around not only the interdiction of some types of behavior within that community, but also the ways in which conflicts are managed in *places* as Pablo's "police neighborhood".

## Big Fest Pagode

When we left the market, Pablo and I were forced to return to the other side of the train tracks. We crossed the footbridge again to walk to the candidate's residence, with Pablo showing me some of the places belonging to the *totality* that socially delimited his neighborhood. One could perceive the difference between the two sides of the neighborhood only with a closer look because, in principle, both were equally endowed with a dense network of commerce and varied services. The differences in the establishments were only related to the level of sophistication of what they offered.

Crossing the main square of the neighborhood, I commented that the bars and clubs there were familiar to me because I had once gone to a "pagode"<sup>11</sup> there with my ex-girlfriend and some friends. When I pointed out the place, Pablo was surprised that I was familiar with the "Big Fest Pagode", stating that he was a regular at the same place. We didn't like pagode, but Pablo said that his attention was captured by the party a few times "because there were so many women". The only time I went to the "Big Fest", I was surprised that, right at the entrance, a particular group of men had formed a kind of "queue" separately from the other people going in. At the time, my girlfriend explained to me that this separate line was formed, in large part, by police and other people who were armed and who were waiting for the house to open. Separating those guys from the rest of the public was a way to better organize the flow of people into attend the event.

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<sup>10</sup> Generically called "militiamen", these are all members of the paramilitary gangs active in the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro. In general, these are groups formed mostly by agents and former agents of public security institutions such as the police, fire department, municipal guard and members of the Armed Forces. Militiamen tend to dispute city territories with drug trafficking gangs, committing crimes such as extortion, murder, threats, and etc. In recent years, however, the definition of the category "militia" as opposed to "trafficker" has become increasingly complex, given the new relationships that both groups have established with each other and with the State itself. On this, see the works by Brama (2019), Misse (2019) and Hirata et al. (2022).

<sup>11</sup> A form of carioca popular music.

Pablo confirmed to me that there were also “a lot of police” at the “Big Fest Pagode” in addition to “women”, but that the exclusive privileges given to security agents no longer took place there. In the past, he said that those who were “police” accessed the venue through another entrance: a small separate room where weapons could be kept in a “safe”. However, Pablo explained, “Big Fest” had not happen for a few years and, when the event returned (now with a new organizer), things changed. Apparently, the party began to cause damage to the former “owner”, largely because of the relatively negative reputation it acquired. Both Pablo in 2019 and my girlfriend in 2012 stated that, every now and then, some of the fights that happened there were resolved “with a bullet”, with people being injured by clashes involving police and other people who went armed to the party. Pablo believed that, since the return of the festivities, the “spirits” of the regulars were relatively calmer.

Pablo said that he had gone to the Fest twice because of women. I asked if the presence of many women at the event wasn’t also the reason for many of the fights among the men. I told him about a comment that a friend of my ex-girlfriend’s had made at the time, that “it wasn’t cool to approach a woman at the Big Fest”, because you didn’t know who was accompanied and who was not, if her escort was armed or not, if a certain girl was a sister, cousin, friend, neighbor or acquaintance of someone who was armed, etc. Pablo minimized the critique, saying that “people exaggerate”. He claimed that the fact that a lot of “police” attended the “Big Fest” was a good thing. For Pablo, the presence of guns discouraged more fights than they encouraged. This was an enunciation of a similar native theory that I had already heard from other police candidates, although without the same level of sophistication:

Brother, think together with me: since everyone is ‘packed’<sup>12</sup>, you don’t want to get into trouble over nothing. The armed dude over there... if you know that the dude might be armed, would you want to start messing around [*esculhachando*]? Are you going to go around grabbing any woman, telling everyone to fuck off? Are you going to get ‘high’ and start annoying others? No! You’ll get it together. You’ll think carefully before doing things. You’ll show some respect. Of course, there’s always gonna be a ‘goose’<sup>13</sup> doing shit, but if you compare it to other places, I’m sure there’s a lot less confusion at the ‘Big Fest’ than at the favela balls or at those playboy parties in the south zone<sup>14</sup>.

Pablo claimed that there was a certain *ethics* of acting in places like Big Fest. Some behaviors were more socially accepted there while others were avoided or were simply forbidden. The moral codes that prescribed the expectations regarding the behavior of the subjects in the concert hall seemed to be linked to the informal presence of the police, where agents ended up assuming different roles as regulars, “security guards”, or even “partners”. Pablo sought to support his argument by contrasting “Big Fest” with other areas of *enjoyment* (“*curtição*”) in Rio (Silva, 2019:11-19), such as the “favela balls” and the “playboy parties in the south zone”. In native terms, he sought to build for himself a kind of symbolic cartography delimiting three distinct *moral regions* (Park, 1976:62-64) that prescribed three disparate ways of acting.

Therefore, if *esculacho* can be sociologically understood as morally disregarding an individual (Pires, 2011:123-124), “*esculhachar*” - or messing around - particularly at “Big Fest” is something that goes against the ethical precepts that inform the expectations of how people should behave in a place like that. Pablo told me that the last time he went to the event, he saw a young man being “dragged” from the party and being “slapped around” by security. The reason for the treatment seemed adequate to him: “why did the guy get in

12 *Trepado*. Slang for “carrying a gun”.

13 Slang from the carioca police universe used to refer to people who supposedly have some involvement with the use or trade of illicit drugs. From the native point of view, just as the animal goose has a suspicious appearance and is always stretching its neck to try to see what is going on around it, the “geese” involved with drugs tend to assume the same suspicious posture, trying to protect themselves from possible repressive action by the police.

14 Reference to the “South Zone” of the city of Rio de Janeiro, a region that concentrates the most affluent neighborhoods, as opposed to the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro.

there in the middle of the party and light up a joint?”. Smoking marijuana, in this case, is an *esculhacho* of “Big Fest”. It was something that Pablo and the other regulars understood to be unacceptable behavior, practiced by people who were properly labeled *geese*. Pablo and many of the other candidates employed this category, taken from the police universe in Rio de Janeiro, to reinforce the criminalization of certain subjects based on their appearance, place of residence, way of speaking and walking, but, above all, based on their supposed involvement with sales and/or consumption of illicit drugs (Cruz e Costa, 2021:244-245).

On the other hand, those figures close to the police such as militiamen, “bicheiros”, and the “security guards” at the event, who occasionally carried weapons without permission were not *esculhachando* at the party – although they were people who were practicing equally illegal activities. The appropriate ways of acting in *police places* thus seem to escape the norms written down in the law. Instead, they are constituted more as a set of rules produced and reproduced by these subjects in an informal way that, sometimes, refers to behaviors that PMs understand as correct in the light of particular readings of *police ethics* (Kant de Lima, 2019:57). While not on duty “24/7,” police officers’ moral sensibilities seem to be always active in *places* traditionally inhabited by them. As Pablo argued, obeying such ethical precepts was an indication of respect for the place.

## Memories and trajectories

As we walked, the hustle and bustle of the neighborhood center became more distant and we began walking along streets that were increasingly peaceful. From the neighborhood’s main arterial road, we moved on to its side streets. Now we were on absolutely local streets, where speed bumps built by the residents themselves forced cars to reduce their speed. There were no housing developments to be seen, nor buildings of many or even a couple of floors. These streets were completely taken up by houses of one or two floors, which now and then shared space with more modest businesses like bakeries, grocery stores, self-service restaurants, or small construction materials stores. The few trees planted on the sidewalks didn’t produce enough shade to mask the sun that still burned our heads. The heat also did not contain the animation of the many children who left the schools at the end of the afternoon, and who, running home, produced a rattling sound as if we were in a large playground built under an open sky. Small clusters of humble men and women were flanked by teenagers, also in school uniforms (who I thought might be the older brothers, cousins, or neighbors of the children), responsible for accompanying the younger ones in their parents’ absence. All of the youths, without exception, wore the uniforms of the public school system.

The scene made Pablo remember a specific part of his childhood: how he, like the children, had studied in one of the public schools present in the neighborhood. He spoke of the “chaos” that was his first school – characterized as a “violent” place with a chronic lack of teachers. The school was located close to his first home, on the “other side” of the train line, close to Avenida Brasil<sup>15</sup>. Pablo said that most of his classmates were residents of the surrounding favelas, and that Sub-Lieutenant Mendonça, his father, told him never to tell any of them that he was a “son of the police”. After moving to the new address, already a little older, Pablo began to study in a “more organized” school. This second school was close to the center of the neighborhood, on the side of the rail line, where we were, and the candidate seemed to have better memories about that institution. It was during this time that Pablo met his first girlfriend and some of the friends he most fully brought into his life. According to him, these young people were not the “little seeds of evil”<sup>16</sup> that his former class supposedly were, generally young people aged 11 to 14 between the 6th and 9th grade of Elementary School.

<sup>15</sup> One of the main internal circulation routes in the city of Rio de Janeiro, which also cuts through a good part of the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>16</sup> Pablo sought to establish a causal relationship between those children living in the favela and crime. Because they had early contact with the world of retail drug trafficking, they were considered to be “bandits in gestation”.

Going back to Pablo's school days encouraged me to talk about my own trajectory and how I had gone from being a student to being a teacher. Pablo asked me why I chose geography and teaching and I explained to him that geography, in my school days, always seemed to me to be the subject that "best explained the world". In particular, a teacher I had in the 3rd year of high school directly influenced my choice, although I initially did not think about becoming a teacher. I told Pablo that my "desire" to follow the teaching profession was only consolidated after I had graduated. It was therefore not something, therefore I had planned from an early age as "being a police officer" was for him. I took advantage of the conversation to ask what Pablo's first memories about the police were, as these could better explain his choice of career.

The candidate began by talking about his father in uniform, still in police gear, which seemed to give him a superhuman aura. The candidate also spoke of the huge stainless steel .44 caliber revolver that the sub-lieutenant kept at home and of some military ceremonies that he followed closely, whose "close order" marching evolutions were painted in the vivid colors of the eyes of a child. At a certain moment, however, Pablo fell silent. A lost look came over his face, as if he was going through his memory in search of some half-forgotten entanglement. He then stated that, once, while playing ball with other children, he became sure that "being a police officer was badass" due to an episode that happened on his old street. He took advantage of the reputation inscribed in his father's *police condition* to rescue a ball that had fallen into the backyard of another "policeman". The man was a retired corporal with a reputation for being "crazy" since, supposedly, he had been removed from his duties in the corporation due to psychological problems. Pablo's father knew him and said that he was just "a bit nervous", but that, just in case, his son should "avoid trouble" and never play football near the PM's house. Whether he was "crazy" or "nervous", the fact is that the reputation built around the man, who mixed attributes of fear and respect<sup>17</sup>, made him feared by the entire neighborhood.

On the occasion of the lost ball, in view of the fear another boy had in ringing the man's doorbell, the other children suggested that Pablo go and ask for the ball back because his father was one of the only people who maintained a cordial relationship with the "crazy" PM. This pushed Pablo candidate to accept the "mission". He introduced himself to the man, saying his name and whose son he was, apologizing for what happened and quietly requesting the ball back. The "policeman" approached and said: "Ah! So you are the son of 'Mendonça'? Take it kid, but make sure you throw the ball over there, okay? Give your dad a hug." The ball was then thrown over the wall, ending in the middle of the street in front of other boys who, in disbelief, witnessed with admiration Pablo's feat. From that day on, the candidate's *status* among his friends increased considerably while the boy who chickened out became a laughingstock. Time and again, the episode was remembered in conversations between their colleagues on the old street, thus becoming part of the collective memories built by that group of young people.

## The "south zone" of the neighborhood

Further on, close to Pablo's residence, the simple-looking houses gained a rather imposing air in the space of a few blocks, indicating a relatively more affluent residential occupation in that part of the neighborhood. The greater sophistication of the residences contrasted with what I had seen up to then, especially since some of them had a more defensive aspect. In these cases, high walls covered a good part of the house's facades, adorned along their top by concertina wire or electric fences. Security cameras were often strategically positioned at the gates of residences, with nameplates affixed to the walls indicating which

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<sup>17</sup> According to Ramos (2017:20), one of the most common representations of respect among PMs is linked to the agent's ability to potentially commit evil. In the native view, the greater the fear of suffering retaliation, the greater the respect that the "policeman" will have among his peers and civilians. The ethics that prescribe certain codes of action in *police places* are intimately related to this problem, since fear of retaliation of various levels of severity leads people to adhere to the informal regulations imposed by the PMs who inhabit these spaces in different ways.

company provided the security services for the residence. The only thing these residences had in common with the simplest houses was the occasional presence of Brazilian flags in the windows, denoting the political preference of most of the residents<sup>18</sup>. Also striking was the fact that certain side streets had guardhouses and men in vests with radio transmitters in their hands. There were no weapons to be seen, however.

I commented on all the differences to Pablo, asking if that part of the neighborhood was very dangerous. Pablo smiled and said that, to the contrary, it was one of the safest places in the region. “This side is the ‘south zone’ of the neighborhood: you can walk in peace.” The way the candidate spoke, saying that his neighborhood was the “south zone” was a way of summarizing, in a few words, that it was the best possible place to live within the neighborhood. Pablo was playing with toponyms, just like so many other residents of Rio’s suburbs did, in order to add greater symbolic value to the representations about their place of residence. Roughly speaking, every place outside the limits of Rio’s “south zone” had its own respective “south zone”, just as every place outside the “favela” areas also had its respective “favela”<sup>19</sup>. In a city with very high levels of segregation, the mobilization of certain toponyms to refer to places describes a fundamentally socio-spatial problem. In Rio de Janeiro, people often end up defining themselves according to the place where they live (Velho, 2002:80).

When Pablo said that I could “walk around in peace” in that part of the neighborhood, he was also referring to the more explicit absence of “bums” in the area: criminals who practiced robberies, thefts, and retail drug trafficking as in other parts of the neighborhood, like in those places called favelas. The candidate stated that he had moved to his new address four years ago, but the location had long since had built a reputation as “a quiet place”. I asked if a lot of “police” lived there, and Pablo explained that some residents were police officers, but more were, in his reading, “elite police” such as investigators of the Rio de Janeiro Civil Police (PCERJ) and PMERJ high-rank officers. His father, an “enlisted”, was an exception in the neighborhood, given that the profile of the residents was typically composed of middle-class families headed by liberal professionals, civil servants, and Armed Forces personnel.

In a relational context, these residents were considered to be an important part of “those at the top” within the *scale of experience* (Masuda and Crooks, 2007:257-258) of those who shared the common daily life of the neighborhood. In the composition of what Pablo considered to be “the neighborhood elite”, there was an important police and military component because it was formed, in part, by cadres of these that held the highest ranks in these institutions, especially officers. However, this did not mean that the influence of “enlisted” police officers was small in the region. My interlocutor claimed that the private “security guards” who worked on the streets were linked to a firm whose owner was a PMERJ sergeant named Fonseca. Although he was close to Sub Lieutenant Mendonça, Pablo did not know whether the security guards were regular workers, nor whether the firm was legal. He claimed, however, that although the young men were armed, especially on the night shift, those he knew were not, in fact, police officers.

Indeed, the support received by the “security guards” was mainly due to the efficiency with which “the boys” faced down potential threats to the neighborhood: “they are always ‘feeling’<sup>20</sup> the street. If they see someone suspicious, they go up to him and ask who they are and where they are going”. Or, again, according to Pablo, “if someone arrives by car at night, and passes by the guardhouse, they have to lower their headlights

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<sup>18</sup> Even after the 2018 presidential election, it was still common to see, throughout Rio de Janeiro, the presence of Brazilian flags displayed in homes and commercial establishments as a form of support for President Jair Bolsonaro. In Pablo’s neighborhood, their presence was even more common than in other places where I walked with other candidates.

<sup>19</sup> Silva (2019:60) draws attention to the denomination that some places receive as “favela” in the sense of making them precarious due to the unequal application of the law, allowing and legitimizing a series of violations suffered by its residents. The State participates directly in this process, assuming an active role in the diffuse denomination of what areas are and are not represented as “favelas”. This delimitation occurs not only in the official cartography of the metropolitan institutes of urbanism and urban planning (as in the “land use” map shown above), but also in the practical effects of State action through the unequal offer of public services, the unequal guarantee rights to the population and, of course, the very violent actions carried out by the police in these areas.

<sup>20</sup> *Palmeando*. Slang from the military police universe, which means “to monitor” something.

and windows. They nudge the person when they are not from around here and this is the protocol”. So I ask if, even with the presence of the security team, some crimes ended up happening, anyhow. Pablo admits that “yes, this happens”, but says that these are “isolated cases” which do not even compare to the crime rates of the surrounding areas, most notably in the neighborhoods located “on the other side” of the train tracks, closer to the largest favelas in the region. Pablo claimed that “the guys here are tough, there’s no mess. We don’t even call 911<sup>21</sup> when things go wrong”. He explained that most of the problems were solved locally, without the *formal presence* of the police. However, all these actions were always done in agreement with the “policemen” who *informally managed* the “security” of the guard posts. The agents acted in the daily life of the neighborhood, not only in uniform, but also by playing other social roles as residents, owners of commercial and service establishments or, simply, as subjects who enjoy the local leisure and entertainment spaces.

When we delved deeper into the subject, Pablo made a point of underlining that, although the daily life around the area was infused by the formal and informal presence of police officers, the *scheme*<sup>22</sup> there was not militia-run. That part of the neighborhood did not have a “gatonet”<sup>23</sup> signal. There were no extra charges for gas or other services. And although all residents were “invited” to pay a monthly “security fee” of ten 2023 USD, it was not obligatory, but only a “contribution” for services rendered. Other “contributions” were also willingly offered by local merchants, such as the cafeteria run by “Bigode”, an old resident of the region who allowed the security guards to eat for free in his establishment every day. Pablo said that the vast majority of residents paid the fee charged for services, since it was worth “the tranquility of the place”. The presence of the “security guards” generally had the support of Pablo’s neighbors and was capitalized on by a city councilor who had grown up in the neighborhood and had moved out a few years earlier to a more affluent seaside enclave. In the town’s main square, a frayed and time-stained raffia banner announced “community support” for councilor “Dr. Sílvio Pereira” who stood behind the security guards’ presence. Pablo said that the politician had family members who were police officers and who maintained bonds of friendship and camaraderie with Fonseca, the security firm’s owner.

It was these *schemes* established between PMs, security guards, residents, and owners of commercial and service establishments that ended up being pointed to as the main reference for “security” by all those who shared the routine of the region. It was the police that continued to be the main reference for conflict management, although it was not formally *the police* as a State institution, but *the police* who were residents, agents who did “odd jobs” in other activities, or even in the “patrons” of other men who offered protection services. Pablo stated that, as in so many other places in the city, the police were also formally present in the daily life of the neighborhood, although they operated there through what seemed to be the mediation of other local “policemen” who more explicitly exercised their territoriality. In that particular situation, “the police” and “police officers” were by no means exclusive categories.

### Assault on “the HQ”<sup>24</sup>

After we finally arrived at our destination, Pablo and I managed to drink almost a dozen beers until night fell. We drank on the terrace of Pablo’s house, watching the sun set behind the mountains that surrounded Pablo’s neighborhood. We were hungry and I went downstairs to get the rest of the crackers that would fill us

21 “190” The emergency number to call PMERJ in Rio de Janeiro.

22 A native category among my interlocutors that refers to any arrangement of relationships of a personal nature that involved individuals, groups, or institutions, and which are articulated around the operation of an illegal or partially illegal market. Regarding the analytical exploration of this category, see Rodrigues (2022).

23 Slang referring to any clandestine cable TV connection. In territories controlled by militiamen, it is very common for gangs to illegally exploit the provision of telephone, television, and internet services.

24 Acronym for “Headquarters”.

up for a few moments. When I returned, my interlocutor was smoking a cigarette and exchanging audios with a girl via *Whatsapp*. I thought it was a “hook up” he had been seeing for some time. Pablo was unsuccessfully trying to convince her to come with us to watch the match. She said she couldn’t, but left open the possibility of meeting him after the game, after her mother went to sleep. The candidate was excited and said that he could even “split an *Uber*” so that she could go from and return to her home “in secrecy”. With the potential meeting thus organized, Pablo said that it would be easy for us to “kill” that last beer and proceed to the “HQ”. This was a bar where he and his friends used to drink, which was no more than a 10-minute walk from where we were. The place was so named because it hosted the periodic meetings of the “old-time police” linked to Pablo’s father, who were a group of retired PMs who maintained friendly relations since the times of the work in the local battalion – the original “HQ” from their time “on active duty”.

Some twenty minutes later, we were back on the street and on our way to the establishment. By then, the heat had let up a bit, but some clouds lower in the sky made the weather muggy. We walked through streets that were even quieter at that time of day, when people were usually resting at home. The clock passed eight PM, and most of the anonymous people we came across were sitting in pubs, grocery stores, and food trailers watching the evening news or “pre-game show” on cable TV channels. Everyone seemed to be waiting for the start of the game, but many people were also crammed into very small buildings that looked to be improvised construction, which I was able to identify as churches only by the praises effusively chanted by the faithful within.

We walked along in a straight line for a long time until, a few corners later, we arrived at the “HQ”. The first thing that caught my attention in the place was an image of Saint George posted on the wall at the back of the bar. The painting had an altar-like aura, with a very bright red light positioned at its base. It was surrounded by newspaper clippings of the last Flamengo teams that had been champions and advertisements for cheap beers which depicted women in bikinis. An older gentleman had his back to the public, washing glasses on the other side of the bar, while a very young man served the customers. No one waited on the tables, so it was necessary to go to the bar to buy beers or request any other service.

“Good evening, Mr. Machado! By how much will we beat them today?” Pablo shouted towards the older man. As he looked over his shoulder, the old man squinted under his glasses like so many other elderly people do in an attempt to see more accurately. When he finally recognized Pablo, he approached and the two greeted each other warmly even though they were separated by the bar. The man’s affection for the candidate was very evident, especially through the interest he showed in Pablo’s family. To Machado, Pablo was “Mendonçinha” and the bar owner soon wanted to know about the candidate’s parents: “Your old man sent me photos of him and your mother on whatsapp. So they’re traveling, right?” Amidst the family gossip, Pablo introduced me as his friend and made fun of our bet, which gave him a large advantage in the face of the moment the two teams were passing through. Amidst the laughter, we greeted each other and then Pablo and I went to sit at one of the plastic tables that were arranged on the sidewalk of the “HQ”. A “litirão” of beer was brought with us, while an order of “pepperoni and fries” was placed with the attendant.

Mr. Machado was Rivaldo’s older brother and Rivaldo was a PM who was a contemporary of Pablo’s father in the local battalion. He had kept bar in the same location for decades and the PM brother ended up establishing the habit of getting together with his “police” friends there. Over time, that tradition was strengthened and other people were integrated into birthday festivities, year-end festivities, or even occasional meetings that transformed the bar into the parallel “Headquarters” for those men. Additionally, some people like the bar owner himself and other associates – mostly friends and family of the “policemen” - participated in these fraternizations. The place was thus a reference mainly for the older agents who patrolled the area, being where they sometimes also had lunch, a snack, or helped with “security” when Mr. Machado needed help “closing the till” or when a customer disturbed the tranquility of the establishment.



Pablo told me that the place was quiet because nobody was “crazy” enough to get into trouble with the owner of a bar who was a “police brother”, especially in a place that, according to him, was a “police area”. That part of the neighborhood did not have a security *system* along the lines of Pablo’s part of the neighborhood, but the presence of “policemen” who were residents of neighboring houses and housing developments gave the bar a reputation that discouraged crimes. Pablo said that, a few years ago, Mr. Machado injured a young man who tried to rob his bar on the day Machado was to pay his suppliers. Machado called his brother, who personally contacted colleagues who were patrolling the area. It was they who arrested the assailant and learned from Mr. Machado, that the young man seemed to have been “sent by someone”, since the robbery attempt had taken place on the day when the cashbox would have been full of money. A few hours after the arrest, Rivaldo told Machado, via phone, that the bandit had “confessed” that a bar employee had informed him of the payment date, and that the two would split the spoils of the robbery. The boy had given the information under torture, and the PM went to try to “cross-check” with Machado’s brother in order to find out if the story he had told was feasible - that is, if the information he had given about the employee’s physical appearance, where he lived, how long he worked at the bar, etc., lined up. No one else heard about the assailant after he was taken away by the agents.

When the robber’s story was confirmed, the employee was executed a few days later when he left for work. He was shot at a bus stop, where he was waiting for the bus to take him to the bar, by an unidentified man who drove by and opened fire. Within a few days, the two accused thieves had been tried, convicted, and had their sentence carried out without the presence of any inspector or deputy, nor of any attorneys, public defenders, or judges. Pablo told me that the assailant had already “passed through” the criminal justice system and was a neighbor of the bartender in a favela located on the “other side” of the neighborhood. He had since been listed as “missing” by the authorities, along with thousands of other people in Rio de Janeiro. Likewise, the bar employee’s killer was never identified by any witnesses – although people close to those involved knew that his death was likely linked to the robbery. No one from the neighborhood itself “spoke up” as a witness in either case. It was as if the robbery had never happened in the neighborhood. There was no official record of anything other than a “disappearance” and a “homicide” that were supposedly unrelated.

I asked Pablo if this type of procedure was common in that area, since, both there and in the blocks close to his house, the “policemen” themselves tried to solve any security problems that appeared without reference to the law or its institutions. Pablo explained to me that it “depended a lot”, emphasizing that the circumstances of the conflict would determine how it would be managed. “If the old man [Machado] wasn’t ‘the policeman’s brother’, nothing would have come of it. The guy was going to be arrested, and quickly, as he was, out there on the ‘track’<sup>25</sup>. No one would have even known that the employee had ‘passed the scene’<sup>26</sup> to the bandit. If it had went easy, the guy would have robbed the bar. He wouldn’t have been arrested and he would have shot the old man”. Pablo then spoke of his own cousin, who, though he wasn’t a police officer, had his car stolen near his home, on Avenida Brasil. The car belonged to the boy’s father (Pablo’s PM uncle, Sublieutenant Mendonça’s brother), who was soon notified of the theft, passing on information about the incident to some colleagues in uniform who were on duty. Pablo said that the vehicle “appeared” that same night, abandoned in a neighborhood next to the crime scene, near the entrance of a favela. “They called 911 and said where the car was! Do you think that any criminal would keep a ‘police’ car up on the [favela] hill? They [the criminals] will send it down right away, bro... It’s not worth it. It’s just a headache for them”.

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<sup>25</sup> Slang for “street”.

<sup>26</sup> Slang used to describe the act of giving tips and advice to someone, as well as issuing a warning. In the situation in question, “passing the vision” means that the employee described how the closing of the bar’s cashier worked, giving the criminal tips on how he could successfully carry out the robbery.

In any case, with the start of the football game, the “classic of the millions”<sup>27</sup> imploded the progress of any conversation that was not following up of the kicks and goals of an absolutely outstanding game, whose score stood at an improbable 4x3 for Flamengo until the 47 minutes of the 2nd half. I could already see myself paying the bet and putting up with Pablo’s teasing, when a ball launched into the goal area and took up by a Vasco “peg leg”<sup>28</sup> striker, was knocked into Flamengo’s net, decreeing the final result of the game and eliminating any possibility of me being embarrassed by having to wear the red-and-black shirt. As soon as the game ended, I said goodbye to Mr. Machado leaving him in the company of his indignation with the final score. No more trains would be running into the center at that time, so I ended up taking an *Uber* after first leaving an equally indignant Pablo at home. We said goodbye and he said he would send a “zap” to his “hookup” to try, in the case of the other game he was playing, “to get out of the tie”.

The next morning, Pablo arrived at the “prep course” almost an hour late. I asked if the delay was because “the night had been good”. After all, that was his expectation. With a frown, he lamented: “Was it good? Brother, her mother was a Vasco fan and was excited about the game. The old lady went to sleep ‘late’ and the ‘girl’ couldn’t meet me. She said ‘it was late’. Can you believe it?”. My impression was that, from that day on, Pablo hated the Clube de Regatas Vasco da Gama even more.

## Final considerations

In this article, I have tried to describe my “tour” through Pablo’s neighborhood as a methodological effort centered on the exploration of so-called *police places*. I undertook this brief exercise to show how looking at the construction of these other places allow us to unravel paths hitherto little traveled in the ethnography of police institutions. Ethnography of the police involves methodological challenges that require different strategies to develop of our research. Within the limits of the article, I have outlined an analytical approach that aims to partially demonstrate how my fieldwork has been constructed. During the course of my fieldwork, I often ended up finding myself traveling through spaces of native daily life where the police presence was quite easy to perceive, even if we were not near a battalion station house or could see a police vehicle or any formal patrol activities. My approach to the police force seeks to face it methodologically as one of the possible effects that are produced *from* the State, but which, on the other hand, are not limited to the institutions formally defined as belonging to the State.

By following these other paths, we can perceive Pablo’s story as one among other trajectories that indicate the way in which candidates and police officers form the same *moral community* (Bailey, 1971:8-10) from the point of view of the common sharing of values and social categories, even before candidates become police. Likewise, walking through these *police places* side by side with my interlocutors made it possible to perceive certain intersections between *territorialities* (Sack, 1983:55) of both social groups in the city. In the places of residence, work, and leisure inhabited by the young people seeking to become police, the police are often able to exercise, through their agents, various forms of informal control and influence over local actions and interactions, which indicate the privileged position that the “policemen” have. They occupy various economic and reputational markets embedded in the most humble areas of a Brazilian metropolis like Rio de Janeiro. From this perspective, I also try to demonstrate that, unlike an elitist view commonly expressed as a common sense opinion, “being a military policeman” is a profession that has significant value in many corners of the Rio de Janeiro suburbs, making the police one of the most important centers of power for those living in these areas.

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27 Nickname received by the Vasco X Flamengo derby.

28 Slang for a bad player.

As Masuda and Crooks (2007:257) argue, an inductive perspective of building analytical perspectives from the experiences accumulated by “flesh and blood” subjects can help us to reflect the less rigid scalar hierarchies that sometimes reify dichotomies present in the play between the macro and micro level of analysis (Ravel, 1998). In other words, my attempt to observe the PMERJ from the *perspective of police places*, again in methodological terms, seemed to me to be closer to Strathernian reflections on the role of social actors in the political construction of their scales of action. Following this suggestion, I tried to think about the production of scales (and their potential analytical cuts) from the social practices of the actors in the field, in a holographic way, taking into consideration the fact that relations between the agents produce their own scale (Strathern 2017:256). If my methodological appropriation has some value, the *scales of experience* inscribed in “being a policeman” indicate that transit through these *police places* is part of the formative path of police candidates, since they “learn to be a policeman” through contact with the agents that cohabit these spaces with them. In my work, this is precisely one of the *effects* that the State brings with it in its formation processes. The data presented in this article is a small contribution to thinking about the unstable nature of the State’s borders. From the native point of view, the desire to “be a policeman” is part of this same formative process created on the “ground of the city” that these young people experience.

Therefore, a *police place* is not a homogeneous enclave circumscribed by clearly delimited geographical boundaries. Rather, it is a relatively open social space, through which people and goods of different qualities circulate. Police territoriality acts more in the sense of “influencing, affecting or controlling” the circulation regimes inscribed in these flows, since the orders that define these places are directed by police or people and groups that are close to them. I think, again in the terms employed by Massey (1991), that what gives the place its specificity is the fact that the constellation of social relations that builds it presents its own local configurations of meaning. Places, from this author’s perspective, have the ability connect together relationships, experiences, and understandings built on a larger scale than what we define as “a place” at a given moment. Such a “global sense of place”, in fact, is part of the exercise suggested by *police places* in methodologically thinking about other scales in the analysis of governance institutions – for example, a State agency such as the Military Police of the State of Rio de Janeiro.

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# La cara pública de lo secreto: Antropología de la Investigación policial

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## Resumen

Este artículo centra su atención en el lugar del secreto para la investigación policial federal en casos asociados a drogas ilegalizadas en una metrópolis de Brasil. Parte de esta tarea toma el nombre de *trabajos de inteligencia*: actividades secretas que apuntan a descubrir redes delictivas. Mediante una aproximación etnográfica conectaré los términos nativos que evocan lo secreto para el trabajo policial, con el concepto de información (su relevancia para los procedimientos policiales y judiciales) y con el valor de la confianza en las relaciones interpersonales. La indagación evidencia cómo el estado se sostiene y recrea en redes de asociaciones provisionales e intereses que, desde las teorías nativas, cuestionan las fronteras atribuidas por las teorías producidas desde el campo de los conocimientos científicos. Analizar el secreto como “forma” de relación y como pauta de transacciones e intercambios permite entender la importancia de lo que produce como tal, dejando el “contenido” que guarda u oculta en un lugar de significación secundario.

**Palabras clave:** secreto, investigación policial, etnografía, narcotráfico.

# The public face of the secret: Anthropology of Police Investigation

## Abstract

This article centers its approach in the place of secrecy for the federal police investigation of crimes associated with illegal drugs in a metropolis of Brazil. Part of this task takes the name of intelligence work: secret activities that aim at discovering delictive networks. Through an ethnographic approach, I will connect the native terms, which evoke secret for the work of the police, with the concept of information (its relevance for the police and judiciary procedures) and with the value of confidence in interpersonal relationships. The inquiry shows how the state is supported by and recreates networks of provisory associations and interests that, from the native theories, question the frontiers attributed by the political theories. Analyzing the secret as “form” of relation and as pattern of change and exchange allows to understand the importance of what is produced as such, leaving the “content” that it keeps or hides in a place of secondary significance.

**Key words:** secret, police investigation, ethnography, drug trafficking.

# A face pública do segredo: Antropologia da Investigação Policial

## Resumo

Este artigo centra sua atenção no lugar do segredo para a investigação policial federal em casos associados às drogas ilegalizadas em uma metrópole do Brasil. Parte desta tarefa leva o nome de trabalhos de inteligência: atividades secretas que procuram descobrir redes delitivas. Mediante uma aproximação etnográfica conectarei os termos nativos, que evocam o segredo para o trabalho policial, com o conceito de informação (e sua relevância para os procedimentos policiais e judiciários) e com o valor da confiança nas relações interpessoais. A indagação evidencia como o estado se sustenta e recreia em redes de associações provisórias e interesses que, das teorias nativas, interrogam as fronteiras atribuídas pelas teorias produzidas no campo dos conhecimentos científicos. Analisar o segredo como “forma” de relação e como pauta de transações e intercâmbios permite entender a importância do que produz como tal, deixando o “conteúdo” que guarda ou oculta em um lugar de significação secundário.

**Palavras-chave:** segredo, investigação policial, etnografia, tráfico de drogas.



# La cara pública de lo secreto: Antropología de la Investigación policial

Brígida Renoldi

## Conexiones

- “¡Hablá o te vas a comer una todavía peor!<sup>1</sup> ¿Quién te dio la merca? Nosotros ya sabemos todo... ¡Hablá! ¿O te pensás que estamos jugando?”, insistió el policía, luego de varios silencios del inquirido, en el momento del interrogatorio.
- “Si hablo soy hombre muerto”, salió finalmente de la boca del detenido con la desesperación de la presa acorralada por el cazador.

“¡Vienen diciendo que nunca tuvieron un antecedente! ¡Y son presos en libertad condicional con varios procesos! ¿Qué se piensan que es nuestro trabajo?”.

“Al final es el juez quien decide. A nosotros lo que nos interesa es que el detenido colabore con informaciones aprovechables para la investigación”.

“Para condenar hay que tener la droga y la persona, materialidad y autoría. Nuestro trabajo investigativo es propiciar la reunión de esos elementos en circunstancias flagrantes”.

“El tráfico es un tumor. Hay que secar todas las venas que lo alimentan”.

Me habían llamado por teléfono una tarde desde la comisaría donde realizaba el trabajo de campo diciendo que fuera urgente porque había habido un *flagrante*.<sup>2</sup> Al llegar me encontré con dos hombres de aproximadamente 30 años de edad, detenidos: sus rostros agobiados con la cabeza inclinada sobre el pecho, como avergonzados o humillados. Uno de los agentes me explicó que habían sido detenidos con un cargamento de 2000 kg de marihuana y que eran reincidentes, y el *delegado* (comisario)<sup>3</sup> me invitó a presenciar el interrogatorio en el que él y dos policías indagaron al detenido. Mientras yo observaba desde un rincón de la oficina, una serie de preguntas rodeó al joven: “quién te dio la mercadería, cuántas veces hiciste eso, quiénes son fulano y mengano, a quién le llevaban la carga”; mientras el joven tenso y casi en llanto repetía “no sé, no sé, no sé nada”. El *delegado* moderaba la interacción con expresiones civilizadas: “si hablás colaborarás con nosotros y eso es mejor para vos”. Mientras uno de los agentes iba entrando en cólera debido a la dificultad de confirmar, por boca del detenido, las informaciones que los habrían llevado al hecho *flagrante*. Las preguntas eran incisivas, interpelando a viva voz, a diez centímetros de sus oídos, al interrogado quien, con una actitud aprensiva y con el cuerpo contraído

1 Se insinuaba con esta expresión que las medidas represivas podrían empeorar, tanto en el interrogatorio como en el peso probatorio que pudiera acentuar la carga penal de la condena.

2 Utilizaré cursivas para conceptos nativos y palabras en lengua extranjera, y comillas dobles para énfasis, conceptos teóricos y citas textuales.

3 Las policías brasileñas se organizan en comisarías y están a cargo de un Delegado de Policía, figura que equivale a la de Comisario en la tradición de muchos países de América Latina, pero con la diferencia de que su formación es en derecho y el rol también se diferencia, ya que además de gestionar las actividades de seguridad lideran la investigación para el Inquérito Policial, el procedimiento administrativo de investigación, de corte inquisitivo, que se realiza previo a la acusación formal. Se diferencian dos carreras, la de los agentes policiales que realizan las tareas principalmente ostensivas e investigativas, y los delegados, que monitorean las actividades de la delegación. También trabajan escribanos en todo lo relacionado con documentación, con la producción y control del Inquérito Policial en tanto pieza material fundamental para el proceso judicial. En la comisaría también hay peritos que realizan análisis específicos para la constitución de pruebas judiciales.

sobre sus propios huesos, amenazado, se negaba a responder. De repente, me empezó a doler el estómago y no pude escribir nada más en el cuaderno. Sentí ganas de llorar y tuve el impulso de salir, sensación que coincidió con la cortés invitación a retirarme, por parte de uno de los policías que, disculpándose, ponía énfasis en la necesidad de mantener en reserva ciertas formas e informaciones que eran propias de las actividades policiales.

Llegué a esa comisaría, situada en uno de los grandes centros urbanos de Brasil, atando cabos sobre las formas de investigación policial luego de hacer trabajo de campo sobre el control del comercio y transporte de drogas prohibidas en la Triple Frontera de Argentina, Brasil y Paraguay (desde 2003). Tomé conocimiento de que en raras ocasiones las prácticas aglutinadas bajo la categoría *narcotráfico* se expresaban conteniendo algún grado explícito de violencia, sobre todo en Argentina, ya que en Brasil los índices de homicidios eran asociados a ajustes de cuentas entre delincuentes, y la mayoría de los presos estaba reclusa por transporte y comercio de drogas ilegalizadas. Al indagar sobre ello los policías hacían referencia a las formas de investigación e inteligencia policial, a las redes y técnicas establecidas para el despliegue de los operativos, y a la importancia que tiene el *informante* en las investigaciones que, por lo general, concluían con la aprehensión de cargamentos de drogas y la prisión de los choferes responsables por los vehículos (Renoldi, 2013). También habían comentado que, tanto en las investigaciones como en los operativos, participaban policías de diferentes centros urbanos -sobre todo de aquellos con los índices más altos de violencia asociada al tráfico de drogas en Brasil-, e insistían en la importancia de esas conexiones para poder “deflagrar” *esquemas*<sup>4</sup> e iniciativas espontáneas. Por este motivo, siguiendo las pistas, en la Policía Federal me dirigí a una de las principales comisarías en la materia, en una metrópolis con uno de los números más altos de prisiones por comercio de drogas y de acciones violentas locales asociadas a este mercado.<sup>5</sup> Varios relatos sobre el trabajo policial con relación al *tráfico* procedían de la experiencia de los policías federales que ya se habían desempeñado en la región de frontera o que aún realizaban seguimientos de situaciones ilícitas en la ruta que une los puntos claves de Paraguay y Bolivia con los grandes centros urbanos brasileños.<sup>6</sup> Se trataba de relatos que evocaban la dinámica de los circuitos, las rutas y la composición de las relaciones que permitían dar cuenta de ellos.<sup>7</sup>

Inicié el trabajo de campo a través de contactos y recomendaciones que me acercaron a *delegados* (comisarios) interesados en hablar sobre su trabajo. La organización política interna de la policía generaba entonces un alto grado de movilidad de las autoridades lo que hacía algo difícil ver de nuevo a las mismas personas. En dos meses que pasaron en 2012 entre los primeros contactos y las visitas siguientes habían renovado gran parte

4 Este término era utilizado para referirse a modos de proceder en red, al ordenamiento de esas prácticas en articulación con protección por parte de miembros de agencias de control (ver Renoldi, 2014a).

5 Realicé trabajo de campo en comisarías de la Policía Federal en tres estados del Brasil con diferentes objetivos desde 2007, y en la convergencia de todos ellos el secreto y lo secreto aparecieron protagónicamente. Interactué con diferentes escalafones de la Policía Federal y en contextos diversos (ámbitos de formación policial y de investigadores de la policía), y formé parte del equipo de investigación social sobre el Inquirito Policial en el Brasil, coordinado por Michel Misse. Para el trabajo de campo en la Comisaría especializada de referencia en este artículo acudí a la observación participante, a conversaciones informales con policías, delegados, escribanos, personal administrativo contratado y personal de limpieza. Tal como explícito en la narrativa, realicé visitas de rutina y también no planificadas, al ser llamada por policías en ocasiones específicas, como la que relato aquí. La mayoría del material que utilizo está en registros de campo personales. Por razones propias del campo y del objeto que trato, no explicitaré el lugar al que se refiere esta etnografía. Entiendo que, a diferencia de los objetos de trabajo policial, los fenómenos sociológicos son relevantes, más allá de los detalles de localización e identificación. Hay investigadores que omiten explicitar esas coordenadas, como por ejemplo Herzfeld (1985), cuando se refiere a su estudio en Grecia, y adhiero a esa posición.

6 Para ahondar en el modo de investigar de la Policía Federal brasileña, véase la tesis de Lowenkron (2012) sobre el trabajo policial en torno a la *pedofilia*. Allí indaga acerca de la construcción social de ese delito en los diferentes planos, desde la perspectiva de agentes judiciales y policiales. Para alcanzar el objetivo de dirimir la culpabilidad o la inocencia de un adulto denunciado por practicar sexo, muchas veces violento, con un niño, es preciso haber imaginado el hecho, haber legislado y haber dimensionado, en términos penales, cómo proceder legalmente. La imagen de la “pedofilia” que proyecta la PF es monstruosa, y puede serlo porque esconde motivaciones y pasiones involucradas, como “el deseo infantil”. Esto colabora con un montaje simplificado a dos actores: víctima y victimario, bien y mal, en un dualismo de valores. Objeto de la comisaría de referencia en esta descripción, el “narcotráfico”, como categoría no judicial, nativa y de gran significación, es construido como monstruosidad en un sentido similar a la *pedofilia* (Renoldi, 2015). Esta coincidencia entre los dos estudios alude al papel de la política pública en la definición de horizontes para la investigación policial. Pero también, a las formas de criminalización e incriminación. Entiendo aquí por “criminalización”, junto con Misse (2017), la acusación prematura y precipitada, acusación moral y no judicial, que usa la categoría criminal como modo de sujeción, a diferencia de la “incriminación”, que se da con la apertura de un procedimiento legal.

7 Utilizaré nombres de fantasía para los operativos y grupos de tareas, y reitero que omitiré por decisión la identificación de la ciudad, las comisarías y los agentes, debido a la naturaleza del trabajo policial y del trabajo etnográfico.

de la planta policial de la comisaría, y varios *delegados* y sus hombres de proximidad se encontraban en otros sectores. Como estas esferas se rigen por la *confianza* para la distribución de ciertos cargos dentro del ámbito público, no fue fácil que se aceptara mi propuesta de acompañar el desarrollo de las actividades cotidianas. En algo la iniciativa les resultaba siempre sospechosa.

Me interesé por las formas de trabajo, especialmente en investigación sobre *tráfico* internacional e inter-estadual. Sabía ya que buena parte de las actividades resultaba del trabajo de *inteligencia policial*, basado en el despliegue de una serie de acciones sigilosas que podían incluir informantes secretos, regulares u ocasionales, seguimiento oculto, escuchas telefónicas, infiltraciones.<sup>8</sup> Estas acciones aparecían recurrentemente encuadradas en estrategias investigativas planificadas, llamadas *operações* (operativos), y se bautizaban con nombres que parecían de películas de acción.

El operativo *Real Trip*, por ejemplo, se había basado en el seguimiento de jóvenes de clase media involucrados en el comercio de drogas sintéticas de origen europeo con destino a Brasil, a cambio de cocaína que ingresaba en aquel continente, principalmente por España y Holanda. La marca de las mochilas en que se transportaba la mercadería bautizó este emprendimiento investigativo. De los datos que se obtuvieron a través de sus detenidos surgió otro operativo: *Golpe Baixo*, que ofrecería también pistas para avanzar en las investigaciones. De esta manera podía observar que la información, lejos de ser un *corpus* de datos, estaba constituida por relaciones de sentido que se iban conformando a través de la interpretación y articulación de elementos que se presentaban de manera dispersa y a veces fragmentada.

Como en otros lugares, el sistema de justicia criminal brasileño puede accionarse a partir de los procedimientos policiales. No obstante, Brasil difiere de otros países en que existe un documento de carácter administrativo, llamado *Inquérito Policial* (IP), que concentra los procedimientos investigativos previos a la intervención judicial (Kant de Lima, 1995; Figueira, 2008; Misse, 2010). El IP puede demorar tiempos variables en concluirse y en sus resultados se basa la acción de *denuncia* del Ministerio Público con la cual se inicia el *proceso judicial* propiamente dicho. Es decir que una parte muy importante de la información que existe sobre un acontecimiento es generada en el marco del trabajo policial, con el conocimiento judicial por el que se autorizan las medidas cautelares, pero sin la participación formal de los defensores de los “sospechosos”. Bajo la forma del *Inquérito Policial* se articulan técnicas para la obtención de pruebas variadas. Pero, algunas de las informaciones que se adquieren en el contexto de los procedimientos previstos formalmente (declaraciones, testimonios, interrogatorios) terminan no formando parte material del *Inquérito* en términos de pruebas. ¿Qué estatus alcanza esa información, que existe, pero no aparece y cuál es su protagonismo para las acciones investigativas?

Al cabo de un tiempo me di cuenta de que la informalidad en la que ocurren algunas de las interacciones orientadas hacia la averiguación de datos en el ámbito policial es constitutiva. Alimenta los procedimientos de investigación sigilosa que no pueden revelarse formalmente en el *Inquérito* porque se perdería el control de la red en la que tales informaciones se articulan. Vale aclarar que al hablar de la dimensión formal no nos referimos simplemente a la aplicación de leyes, entendidas estas como piezas canónicas de grandes esquemas decisorios. Hablamos sí del minucioso esfuerzo al que se doblega todo trabajo orientado a la acción judicial: “in-formar”, “colocar en forma” datos, pistas, fragmentos de un acontecimiento que tuvo lugar en el pasado, esto quiere decir, tornarlos legibles en términos y códigos legítimos que viabilicen la decisión en el contexto de las leyes vigentes. Tal procedimiento puede diferir de aquel conocido como “hacer justicia”,

8 Marco Cepik define técnicamente la inteligencia como la recolección de informaciones con o sin consentimiento, la cooperación o el conocimiento por parte de los blancos de la acción. Según esta acepción, inteligencia puede equipararse a secreto o información secreta. Los trabajos de inteligencia tienen que ver con el estudio del “otro” y buscan elucidar situaciones en las cuales las informaciones más relevantes son potencialmente manipuladas o escondidas, en que hay un esfuerzo organizado por parte de un adversario para desinformar, tornar turbio el entendimiento o negar conocimiento. Este tipo de “servicios” caracterizan las prácticas de gobierno de los estados modernos (Cepik, 2003: 28-29).

cuando este último se basa en conceptos del bien operando sobre ideas de “verdad” que pueden estar más allá de lo probable en el plano judicial. En estas circunstancias los agentes pueden ser creativos al punto en que la forma jurídica permita arrojar el resultado esperado por la verdad alcanzada fuera de las formas. Este sería el caso de la “verdad verdadera”, referida varias veces por miembros de la justicia argentina como resultado de la convicción a través de fuentes (confidencias, rumores) que se encuentran fuera de la forma legítima pautada por los rituales legales, y reconocido también en las prácticas brasileñas (Renoldi, 2007, 2013).

Inicialmente la incesante búsqueda de la *verdad* en el ámbito policial y judicial exige determinados procedimientos sigilosos para preservar el avance y éxito de las investigaciones. Es decir que se pueden identificar secretos en el ámbito legal, pero también secretos que trascienden lo rigurosamente establecido por ley. La caracterización de las investigaciones como “secretas” les otorga así un halo de misterio y, con ello, el temor al potencial de lo desconocido, a menudo imaginado como negativo. Como afirma Simmel (1939): si bien lo que es secreto no está ligado al mal, el mal se asocia a lo que es secreto. Así, del misterio y de lo secreto que rodean todo aquello que es profundo e importante, surge la falacia de que todo lo que es secreto también es profundo e importante. Este tipo de apreciaciones, por parte de quienes no integran la Policía Federal, suele recaer sobre el trabajo que en ella se realiza. El secreto ocurre envuelto en la posibilidad y en la tentación de la revelación y, con el riesgo externo de que sea descubierto, se combina el intento de develarlo. Se suma a ello la tentación de romper -por indiscreción o por confesión- la barrera que crea lo secreto, que acompaña la vida de lo que es secreto. Este aspecto que aparecía reiteradamente en el trabajo policial comenzó a intrigarme cada vez más, y a esbozar cierto sentido al entender paulatinamente cuál es el lugar del *Inquérito Policial* para las investigaciones.

## Trasposición y sigilo

Al iniciar las aproximaciones noté que la Policía Federal era distinguida. La formación universitaria de sus miembros sumada al carácter de los crímenes que atentan contra la Unión de Estados Federados del Brasil, con los cuales se enfrenta desde que se creó en 1960, delinean su estatus de élite. Apelé a policías que trabajaban fuera del predio central, presentándome y solicitando el apoyo a través de la influencia que pudieran ejercer para facilitar mi acceso. Finalmente, la casualidad de reencontrar en el tejido jerárquico a una persona previamente conocida vendría a satisfacer la lógica relacional local, de la que tanto había oído hablar y aún leído. Ella liberó mi ingreso por medio del *delegado* (comisario) del momento, y éste me presentó a las personas del *cartório*. Se trata de la oficina administrativa desde donde se solicitan y organizan los documentos que componen el *Inquérito*, además de realizarse muchos de los controles internos de las actividades policiales. Comencé a pasar bastante tiempo con el *escrivão* (escribano)<sup>9</sup> y con los asistentes, escuchando hablar de casos, investigaciones pasadas, procedimientos burocráticos, así como de situaciones de trabajo y personales. Allí, como en toda cocina, fui entendiendo qué era una *delegacia* (comisaría) de la Policía Federal.<sup>10</sup>

Me interesé en principio por las piezas de los *Inquéritos Policiales* que resultaban de los operativos por “tráfico internacional”: *termos de declarações, autos de prisão em flagrante, autos de apreensão, pericias de constatação, comunicações de colaboração eficaz do réu, informações, boletim individual da vida pregressa*, etc.

9 El *escrivão* es el policía que cumple las formalidades procesales, que redacta las actas, redacta las intimaciones y autos, y está atento a los plazos. También su ingreso es por concurso.

10 Según el portal de datos abiertos, la Policía Federal del Brasil (PF), o “Departamento de Polícia Federal (DPF), é uma instituição policial brasileira, subordinada ao Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública, que, de acordo com a Constituição de 1988, exerce com exclusividade as funções de polícia judiciária da União. Atua também na segurança pública para a preservação da ordem pública e da incolumidade das pessoas, bem como dos bens e interesses da União, exercendo atividades de polícia marítima, aeroportuária e de fronteiras, repressão ao tráfico de entorpecentes, contrabando e descaminho. A sede fica situada em Brasília, no Distrito Federal, havendo unidades descentralizadas (superintendências regionais) em todas as capitais dos estados da federação, bem como delegacias e postos avançados em diversas cidades do país” (ver <https://dados.gov.br/organization/about/policia-federal>).

Mi sorpresa con las derivaciones de la lectura fue progresiva. Todo *flagrante* es definido como aquel acto ilícito cuyo curso es interrumpido por agentes policiales. Cada situación *flagrante* con la que se instauraba un *inquérito*, recortada y descripta como única y sorpresiva, iba evidenciando, a lo largo del recorrido por sus páginas, la trama que la precedía, y que también la explicaba como manifestación repentina frente a los ojos del Estado y de los legos.

Fui notando que, si bien en su gran mayoría la primera vez que los detenidos eran interrogados se negaban a declarar, haciendo uso de su derecho a permanecer callados, las veces siguientes iban ofreciendo información detallada sobre personas conocidas, situaciones variadas vividas, acuerdos y desacuerdos alcanzados, recorridos por lugares que vinculaban gente, cifras sobre cantidades de dinero, drogas, vehículos, tiempos de demora, plazos, calendarios, mapas, rutas, ‘telefonemas’, arreglos entre las partes directamente involucradas en la operación comercial y con facilitadores. Me parecía curioso que en las inquisiciones posteriores dieran tantos datos comprometedores para otras personas y para sí mismos o que, inclusive, se dispusieran por propia voluntad a “colaborar eficazmente” con la policía (como constaba por escrito en todos los casos en que los interrogados daban información). Ante mi perplejidad los jefes me explicaron que aquello resultaba de la aplicación de técnicas de interrogación en diferentes momentos del desarrollo del *Inquérito*. La persona va siendo cercada con informaciones que la policía posee y sondea en modo de pregunta: “en qué lugar usted se encontraba x día, con quién fue acompañado a x lugar, hacia dónde se dirigía y en qué vehículo, con quién habló por teléfono antes de ser detenido”. Quien pregunta suele conocer la respuesta, pero no la expone ante el interrogado para que sus respuestas confirmen lo que ya se sabe. El procedimiento lleva al interrogado a hablar. Lo hace en el momento en que entiende que, de no hacerlo, su situación puede verse más comprometida todavía.

Las investigaciones secretas, llamadas “de inteligencia”, permiten el seguimiento de las acciones ilegales. A su vez, toda esa información opera como contexto en el momento de las declaraciones e interrogatorios. Según Cepik los “servicios de inteligencia surgieron en el contexto de los Estados absolutistas europeos, buscando generalizar (...) [la] reducción de costos en la obtención de las informaciones y el deseo de ampliar su capacidad de dominación (...), [requisitos funcionales] que los nuevos gobernantes aparentemente pretendían atender al crear tales organizaciones” (Cepik, 2003:19, mi traducción). Se trata de formas de proceder que caracterizan a la tradición del *civil law*, marcada por la inquisitorialidad en los procedimientos: investigación orientada a la obtención de pruebas incriminatorias, sin conocimiento ni defensa por parte de las personas que la policía considera sospechosas (Merryman, 1969; Berman, 1996).

El origen espurio de esta tradición, ligado históricamente a los procedimientos de la inquisición española que incluían técnicas de tortura orientadas a la confesión de herejía, tal como lo advierte Berman (1996), fue creando con el tiempo ciertos pudores con relación a la explicitación abierta de las técnicas utilizadas para fines investigativos. Al mismo tiempo, por su fuerza histórica inscrita en las formas y prácticas institucionales, el rasgo inquisitorial permanece en la base de lo que garantiza, según ellos, la eficacia del trabajo policial. La frase de un *delegado* lo evidencia cuando dice: “Aquí, aunque no queramos, trabajamos para acusar, inclusive buscando la verdad, que es siempre condenatoria”.

En esta tradición se asienta el trabajo de inteligencia policial, basado en formas secretas de obtención de información. Según los agentes: “el trabajo de inteligencia es construir la historia de un dato para flagrar”, es acompañar una secuencia de pistas o indicios (en el sentido formulado por Ginzburg, 1999) hasta que se configura un hecho delictivo. Observemos que en esta frase está implícita la idea de *información* como punto de partida. Para entender mejor cómo opera la información, antes que en términos de “cosa” puede ser definida como “relación” práctica y material entre dos lugares, uno central y el otro periférico (Latour, 1999). La información es sentido direccionado que crea los términos que vincula, y cuando es confidencial, reservada o secreta, se construye a través de técnicas que no pueden ser publicitadas como procedimientos de oficio, es decir, intrínsecos al quehacer de los grupos de inteligencia. En algunos casos puede haber registros escritos

que se incorporan al *Inquérito Policial* como informes. Si no los hay, la información transita de boca en boca en el circuito restringido delimitado por el sigilo, o es preservada en anotaciones que no circulan, pero sirven para el registro personal de los investigadores.

Pongamos un ejemplo: “Un cargamento de una tonelada de marihuana pasará por Foz do Iguaçu en un camión Volvo tal día a tal hora en dirección a São Paulo”. Además de los datos explícitos en este enunciado hay muchos otros implícitos allí. Los dos términos que acaban de crearse en él, quien entrega la droga y quien la transporta a un destino, se proyectan en el mismo momento en que los datos circulan, involucrando ahora, además, a quien ya está sabiendo que aquello va a ocurrir, y a quien puso a disposición los datos. Por otra parte, queda en evidencia que estos datos revelados, pertenecientes al dominio de lo ilegal, y por eso de lo oculto, de lo secreto, definen su calidad de secreto en el momento en que rompen la clausura en la que permanecieron hasta entonces. Lo secreto, como afirma Simmel, contiene una tensión que se disuelve en el momento de la revelación, que es cuando se constituye como forma pública (Renoldi, 2014b).

A menudo los policías también me advertían: “Estate atenta que la semana que viene vamos a tener un *flagrante*”, lo que indicaba que las investigaciones, administrando bien la información secreta, permitirían interceptar una organización o una operación ilegal. Si bien la prisión en *flagrante* se define al aprehender a la persona con “las manos en la masa”, es común que los caminos que conducen al *flagrante* sean complejas redes de circulación de datos, relatos e historias que involucran a diversos grupos, personas y materiales. En ellas, lo secreto ocupa un lugar central.

Podríamos decir que el secreto es una forma, y que su contenido, lo secreto, se realiza como tal en el momento en que trasciende el ámbito de restricción, vinculando precisamente los dos universos que no podrían relacionarse. Siempre el secreto se conserva en relaciones sostenidas en el valor de la confianza (Sztompka, 1999). Pensemos en las acciones policiales o estrategias judiciales de investigación. No es tan raro que importantes operativos, marcados por movimientos sigilosos, fracasen por algún dato que trasvasa el circuito restringido previsto para que circule la información. El hecho de que la información trascienda el ámbito y las relaciones que la protegen como sigilosa podría ser interpretado como un acto de traición o de descuido de alguien. Sin embargo, caeríamos en un error metodológico al pensar que lo que mantiene el secreto es apenas la “lealtad” entre las personas que tienden a conservarlo.

Jones (2014) indaga acerca de las implicaciones antropológicas y etnográficas del estudio del secreto, a través de la revisión de diferentes tradiciones, contribuciones y problemas. Sin descuidar las dimensiones epistemológica y ética que nos involucran con este tipo de investigaciones el autor da relevancia a la conceptualización de una antropología del secreto como una práctica que involucra flujos de conocimiento. Retomaré algunas de sus ideas a partir del lugar del secreto para la policía.

Al observar las investigaciones policiales quedó en evidencia que el hecho de compartir lo secreto opera como estrategia de inclusión en la red de relaciones de confianza. Personas conocidas desde antes pueden ser incluidas en el circuito donde se comparte el secreto, como manera de afirmar el vínculo anterior, y pueden también constituirse nuevas relaciones al compartir un secreto, con la expectativa de generar confianza en otros ámbitos. Lo más frecuente es pensar que el secreto se mantiene dentro de grupos, o sociedades secretas, como sostiene Simmel. Pero, para entender mejor su lugar, debemos considerar que, cuando se habla de redes creadas por la conservación del secreto, no necesariamente se habla de grupos, en el sentido de aglomeraciones definidas de personas, basadas en intereses comunes y en lealtades que afirman su proyección en el tiempo como ya constituidas.

Precisamente lo que nos permite comprender cómo opera la información confidencial una vez que toma cierto curso, es que ella contribuye con la red en la que personas y cosas se comprometen en circunstancias que se proyectan con mayor o menor grado de durabilidad en el tiempo, a la vez que hace evidente la existencia de agrupamientos, diferentes grupos con relativas cuotas de poder de decisión y sus variaciones.

Así lo constata un agente policial al afirmar que “no existe grupo en la policía, el grupo se hace con fines puntuales y así como aparece desaparece”.<sup>11</sup> En este sentido también podemos decir que no todo circuito por el que transita un secreto se constituye como una asociación secreta, aunque el secreto sea condición para que la asociación se pueda consolidar.

Apenas iniciado el trabajo de campo en la *delegacia* varias veces me contaron una situación que había ocurrido tiempo atrás. Se refería a la incautación de una centena de kilos de cocaína ocultos en el estómago de pescados que serían exportados a Portugal vía marítima, junto a la que se encontraron millares de euros. A través de diferentes versiones pude reconstruir la historia que por fragmentos dispersos fue adquiriendo sentido. Agentes y *delegados* recordaban que la noche de la incautación había habido un hurto de la caja fuerte (*cofre*) que contenía el material aprehendido, derrumbando violentamente la puerta del depósito en el que se encontraba, sin que fuese percibido en el entorno. Este episodio que tuvo lugar en la comisaría que se encontraba en uno de los pisos del edificio que hasta hoy ocupa una manzana, próxima a otras oficinas y comisarías en funcionamiento, llevó a los funcionarios a sospechar que el hurto podía haber sido promovido por los mismos policías. Por coincidencia, días antes el *escrivão* de esa unidad se había visto involucrado como cómplice de un homicidio cometido por un agente que formaba parte de un equipo de investigadores muy eficiente, conocido como Grupo Alfa. Un hombre había sido asesinado a quemarropa en un lugar público por no haber cumplido los plazos para la devolución de un dinero prestado por el agente policial quien, además de su cargo público, se desempeñaba como usurero (*agiota*). La cámara pública que captó la imagen hizo posibles los procedimientos que procesaron a ambos por esa muerte. Según algunas versiones, el *escrivão*, al ver su carrera policial comprometida, le propuso a un colega de trabajo que formaba parte del Grupo Alfa, simular un hurto para quedarse con el dinero de la operación recién concluida. “Lo mató la confianza, porque pensó que por ser funcionario y conocer a tanta gente dentro de la policía lo eximirían del delito”, afirmó un agente que lo había conocido en persona. Los investigadores de la *corregedoria*, instancia superior de control y supervisión de la policía, comenzaron a atar cabos y abrieron un *Inquérito Policial* para investigar el hurto, que se agregaba al *inquérito* anterior abierto por homicidio, y apuntaba a ese agente como sospechoso. Dicen que, en el interrogatorio referido al homicidio, el *escrivão*, que ya había entendido la gravedad de las acusaciones, creyendo que podría ser beneficiado por la delación premiada que reduce las condenas a cambio de información que permita avanzar con las investigaciones, habló. Pero, lo hizo sin que le hubieran ofrecido este recurso, con lo cual su testimonio no podía encuadrarse en tal beneficio. Reconoció entonces que a lo largo de tres años en varias oportunidades había sido invitado a formar parte de acciones ilegales consistentes en retirar la cocaína de los paquetes y suplantarla por yeso, así como a declarar menos cantidad de droga de la que había sido realmente incautada. Al “abrirse”, pensó que sería condenado por su asociación con el homicidio, pero sobreesido por el hurto de la caja fuerte. Y olvidó que para sus colegas del Grupo Alfa con seguridad se configuraría como un *XO* (un delator), lo que en ciertos casos puede costar la vida. A partir de lo que él declaró todos los miembros del Grupo Alfa fueron investigados, posteriormente procesados y condenados a prisión. Se supo que manteniendo la excelente reputación que tenían en la comisaría, basada en el éxito de los procedimientos, en la osadía de los hombres para infiltrarse en terrenos difíciles como las FARC en Colombia, y sus capacidades extraordinarias para obtener información, los agentes del Grupo Alfa consiguieron evadir más de la mitad de los procedimientos legales. Inclusive hoy corre el rumor de que habían llegado a asesinar transportistas para quedarse con las cargas de los camiones.

En este acontecimiento vemos de qué manera la confianza sostenida en compartir un secreto sobre los modos de operar ilegalmente con la droga en el ámbito legal, configuró formas de agrupamientos y un grupo con fines específicos y de durabilidad limitada. Vemos también cómo amenazó la integridad del grupo una

<sup>11</sup> Los grupos policiales se constituyen para dar curso a una investigación o conjunto de investigaciones específico, ordenan el trabajo policial en el tiempo y tienen por objetivo elucidar hechos que requieren una inversión de tiempo mayor, seguimiento y desplazamientos.

delación, caracterizada como propia de un *X9* por fundarse en la revelación del secreto que conlleva un gesto de traición dentro de un grupo o red limitada, en beneficio propio. En este caso el *escrivão* no podría ser visto de otra forma por sus colegas enjuiciados que como un *X9*, porque su red de pertenencia en estos negocios no defendía los objetivos explícitos de la institución. Hoy en día los policías que conocieron el caso aprecian positivamente su gesto de haber denunciado la asociación ilícita, porque interrumpió una práctica que llevaba casi tres años desarrollándose. Sin embargo, no dejan también de evaluarlo de forma negativa por haber faltado al compromiso de silencio con la intención de aliviar su situación particular. La lógica del secreto opera en estos niveles y está más allá de lo moralmente positiva o negativa que pueda considerarse una conducta. El valor del secreto es formal, y su forma puede abrigar cualquier contenido moral.<sup>12</sup>

## La confianza y el informante

El episodio relatado nos lleva a considerar la *confianza*, término nativo que se usa para designar un tipo de relación que garantiza la preservación de intereses comunes por un tiempo no previsible. Se utiliza a menudo la expresión *hombres de confianza*, por ejemplo, para hablar de las personas que acompañan con proximidad a un funcionario (como suele suceder con el *delegado* en algunas policías) en las funciones y ámbitos por los que transita. También para aquellos que están fuera de la institución, pero que mantienen cercanía con algún miembro de la institución. En este último caso, el *hombre de confianza* no es el *informante*, si bien puede colaborar con información, también en el contexto de intercambio de favores, protección, salida de un aprieto o alguna ayuda material.

El desenlace ocurrido con el Grupo Alfa nos deja también frente a la *traición*, que se expresa en ciertas jergas urbanas como *trairagem*, si se trata de un acto, o *traíra* si se trata de la persona que traiciona. La traición y el traidor sólo pueden existir si hubo, como condición previa, *confianza*. Es justamente el acto con el que se quiebra la confianza el que amenaza la integridad del grupo y la conservación de intereses comunes. El acto de traicionar coloca enseguida a la persona del otro lado, con el riesgo potencial de tornarse un enemigo. La *traición* es siempre una expresión individual inscrita en redes de influencia distantes a aquellas que prevalecieron hasta el momento de su manifestación.<sup>13</sup>

Pero exploremos los intersticios en que estas relaciones se constituyen. El *hombre de confianza*, en su formulación ideal, es aquel que no *vacila*, que no duda en defender los intereses que lo unen a una red de relaciones capaces de constituir un grupo. De ahí el término nativo *vacilar* para remitir a la acción de desviar la conducta, errar, perder una oportunidad; y *vacilão* para quien vacila. En la práctica el *hombre de confianza* puede vacilar, dando alguna información en una circunstancia de presión, distracción o en la cual se envuelve sin medir las consecuencias, y con ello exponerse a un retaceo de la confianza, a la desconfianza, por parte de quien lo considera.

El *vacilo* no se deriva de la intención de rebelarse y de afectar los principios a los que hasta entonces se respondía voluntariamente. De modo que se puede reconstituir la confianza después de un *vacilo*, si bien su reiteración, como expresión de distracciones recurrentes o descuidos, puede acarrear la ruptura del vínculo. La relación de confianza, en lo que se refiere al trabajo interno de la policía, es una relación compuesta por escasa asimetría, a pesar de que está marcada por la jerarquía en la que el *hombre de confianza* está al servicio

<sup>12</sup> La recomendación de lectura de Lowenkron y Ferreira (2014) en una de las evaluaciones me permite en principio equiparar la intención explícita de las autoras de analizar los documentos más allá de lo que contienen, focalizándose en lo que significa “documentar” en el marco policial y judicial. Mi indagación va al encuentro de esta perspectiva al focalizar la atención no sobre el contenido del secreto, sino sobre lo que significa tornar algo secreto. Por razones de extensión no será este el espacio donde mayor provecho podré sacar de este artículo, aunque queda remitido aquí para indagación de los lectores.

<sup>13</sup> Para pensar cómo opera la tracción en otros contextos ver Boivin y otros en la publicación de 1998. Ver también Giraud, 2010.



de quien confía en él. *Ser de confianza* es su valor, valor que está en el atributo que el otro le otorga y al que éste sabe responder con compromiso.<sup>14</sup>

A diferencia del *vacilo*, la *trairagem* constituye un acto intencionado de disidencia que termina en la ruptura. Su fuerza deriva del hecho de que la persona estableció compromisos con intereses que están por fuera del circuito al que respondía. Debido al tipo de trabajo que realiza la Policía Federal, que comprende informaciones sigilosas, no es poco común que se utilice lo secreto como medio de *vacilação* o de *trairagem*, adquiriendo de esta manera el estatus de mercancía.

Apelando a la dimensión lúdica de las palabras podríamos decir que el *informante* es un traficante de información privilegiado para el ámbito policial, si bien en términos jerárquicos se ubica en un lugar subalterno a los policías, sobre todo cuando su participación se vuelve regular, más que eventual. Él hace circular relaciones, conecta, dispone elementos para que sean asociados, proporciona contexto para las investigaciones policiales. De acuerdo a lo que relatan los policías, por lo general se trata de personas que han estado involucradas en actividades ilícitas, o que pueden inclusive estarlo (esto jamás es público), y que conocen por dentro movimientos, lugares, personas y circunstancias, que la policía desconoce. El informante está territorializado, habita un lugar, un barrio, y conoce su dinámica.<sup>15</sup> Con sus informaciones puede obtener réditos no sólo financieros<sup>16</sup>, como determinados permisos, acceso a situaciones y lugares, apoyo o respaldo de los policías y, dependiendo de cómo se establezcan los acuerdos, buena reputación también en su propio ámbito. El *informante* puede ofrecer datos sobre situaciones que conoce, pero que no suelen estar referidas a su propio grupo (esto precipitaría una ruptura con él), y sí a aquellas configuraciones con las cuales, por tratarse de prácticas ilegales, acostumbran a estar en contacto y poseer conocimientos detallados.<sup>17</sup>

De acuerdo a lo expuesto, el *informante* aparece como una figura ambigua que afianza la continuidad entre lo *legal* y lo *ilegal* (representados, respectivamente, por el Estado y los transgresores, como dos universos discontinuos) desde el momento en que se vuelve un componente clave para ciertas investigaciones policiales. Los policías coinciden en que una vez que “pasa el primer servicio”, que ofrece los primeros datos significativos para una investigación, el *informante* comienza a ser tomado en serio. Si esta situación se repite, evidenciando la efectiva colaboración con la policía, llega a formar parte de una lista registrada que permanece en la sede policial.

<sup>14</sup> Agradezco en este punto las provocaciones de Patricia Vargas, y los debates que se derivaron de ellas con Antônio Luz Costa, Cesar Texeira, Bruno Cardoso, Antônio Rafael Barbosa y Lenin Pires.

<sup>15</sup> Existe también el *informante* ocasional que puede estar motivado emocionalmente a raíz de algún conflicto y actuar por venganza, generalmente de forma anónima, pasando datos que deberán ser confirmados por la policía. A diferencia del *informante* regular, no existe con éste ninguna proyección del vínculo.

<sup>16</sup> En los casos vinculados a información sobre el circuito de las drogas ilegales pueden recibir dinero, entre los 200 y 5000 dólares, por la información que disponibilizan, dinero que la mayoría de las veces está contemplado en el presupuesto policial destinado a investigación.

<sup>17</sup> Existen procedimientos que involucran a informantes y que dan como resultado detenidos en flagrante, quienes irreversiblemente serán condenados, perdiendo así su condición civil plena. Se trata de situaciones en que los informantes están insertos en el mercado ilegal y consiguen involucrar personas inexpertas para que realicen el transporte de mercadería. Droga de calidad dudosa puede ocultarse en el interior del vehículo cuya documentación puede también ser apócrifa. He interpretado estos casos como “sacrificios”, ya que se trata de una “entrega” o una “cama”, como se dice en la jerga argentina, por la que una vida queda sujeta a la prisión, sumando así a los registros estadísticos de la eficacia policial en el combate al ‘narcotráfico’ (Renoldi, 2007). Si bien constituyen una pérdida económica para quien propicia la situación a ser deflagrada por la policía, suele haber en este procedimiento un acuerdo por el cual el informante colabora, a cambio de que su trabajo en el ámbito ilegal no sea entorpecido por las acciones policiales.

## El X9 y la traición

En un lugar muy próximo se encuentra el concepto nativo de *X9*, que podría entenderse como “delator” y traducirse con cierta proximidad a *buche* o *buchón* para el caso argentino.<sup>18</sup> El término actualmente podría referirse a la *traición* por antonomasia y, en consecuencia, carga con un sentido acusatorio por parte de quien lo utiliza, haciendo evidente que la delación siempre es sobre prácticas ilegales que pueden ocurrir fuera o dentro del ámbito institucional. La acción es *xisnovear* y la palabra se utiliza por quien es delatado o ve en esa posibilidad una amenaza. La condición de *X9* es despreciada como valor humano, y apreciada técnicamente por la policía siempre que las informaciones les sean útiles. Es más que una actividad, es una condición de la persona, podríamos decir inclusive que llega a ser considerada un tipo de carácter. Resulta difícil que alguien pueda ganar dinero por mucho tiempo como *X9*, como sí lo hace el *informante*, porque en algún momento el *X9* puede ser asesinado por un miembro de la red en la que se inserta su propia víctima, red de la que posiblemente ya haya formado parte con anterioridad. Comporta un sentido degradante y profundamente contaminante, tanto para quien es objeto de la delación como para quien recibe la información sobre lo que está siendo delatado.

El *X9* está en las antípodas del *hombre de confianza*. Se lo entiende como una condición irreversible, puesto que “una vez *X9*, *X9* para siempre”. A pesar de que la información que pase a los policías pueda ser confiable, en una relación en que la confianza mantenga la vitalidad del grupo, él difícilmente podría convertirse en hombre de confianza. Con todo, algunos policías han equiparado la noción de informante a la de *X9*, afirmando que éste puede llegar a ser un *hombre de confianza*. Estas aseveraciones no emergen de la estricta reflexión que en otros contextos de charla y entrevistas los ha llevado a distinguir con mayor precisión el carácter diferenciador entre ambos términos.

En una conversación con el antropólogo Lenin Pires sobre este tema, un relato suyo resulta elucidativo. Se refiere a los términos aquí tratados, pero en un contexto extra policial, poniendo en evidencia el valor de la *confianza* en el ámbito del comercio de drogas ilegales y la iniciativa policial en busca de información, lo que nos sirve de contrapunto para pensar.

Eu tinha um amigo que era um cheirador<sup>19</sup> contumaz e com frequência me levava para uma boca<sup>20</sup> no Parque. Tinha o sugestivo apelido de “espanta-neném”. Já sentiu o drama, né? O “espanta” era um cara que sabia todas as tramas das bocas do Complexo<sup>21</sup>. Quem mandava, quem ia morrer, quem estava jurado, etc., etc. Era um cara “de confiança” dos homens do tráfico. Sabia de tudo e não era do esquema. Era super respeitado e volta e meia pediam sua opinião, quando ia comprar sua “parada” e tinha algum lance complicado. Comprava fiado na boca e nunca foi pego na vacilação. Um dia os “hômni”<sup>22</sup> entraram numa de escorar o espanta e tentar fazê-lo de informante. Era super-viciado o cara, mas disse que não era X-9. Sumiu da boca por um tempo, para não ser enquadrado pelo pessoal da ZZª DP (Delegacia de Polícia). E disse para a rapazeada o que estava se passando. Neguinho da boca armou um esquema *delivery* só para ele. Subiu no conceito da moçada e se tornou ainda mais cobiçado pelo povo da puliça. Porque um cara desses tem princípios. Caso ele passe para o lado do policial, não vai se vender por meia dúzia de

18 La expresión suele ser usada en el centro este del país, y se ha naturalizado al punto de que pocas personas podrían reconstruir su origen semántico. Sin embargo, la referencia a una revista de cuentos policiales de la década del cincuenta, llamada *X9*, podría ser una referencia, cuando este nombre es asociado a un fenómeno que comenzó a darse en los años setenta, que consistía en la entrega de una credencial, por parte de la policía, a civiles que, interesados en el trabajo policial, desarrollaban actividades de colaboración sin establecer ningún vínculo formal con el Estado. Por este motivo, la expresión *X9* es muy utilizada en los ámbitos delictivos, para referirse a los policías infiltrados en ámbitos comunes buscando información (algo que seguramente en su momento harían aquellos civiles voluntarios). Hoy en día el término desplazó esta referencia hacia lo que se considera un valor negativo en una persona. Se usa siempre que la persona revela informaciones restringidas que puedan perjudicar una relación por el hecho de exponer a alguna de sus partes a una crítica moral o a una intervención legal.

19 Consumidor de cocaína.

20 Punto de venta de drogas ilegalizadas.

21 Barrio de referencia.

22 Hombres.

moedas, nem vai inventar informação só pra ficar bem na fita. Na época eu não me ligava muito nesse assunto. Era amigo do “espanta” e super me amarrava na forma como ele flanava na parada. Para você ter uma ideia, o cara ficou tão pressionado que acabou indo viver em uma cidade no interior do estado. Engordou e conseguiu até disminuir o consumo. Hoje perdi o contato com ele.<sup>23</sup>

Los agentes de policía afirman que es muy importante evaluar la motivación de un *informante*, porque de ella dependerá la calidad del vínculo y de la información que se pueda obtener. No siempre él se aproxima por voluntad propia; a veces son los mismos policías que salen en su búsqueda, como lo evidencia el relato anterior. Hoy en día se los llama técnicamente *fuentes humanas* o *colaboradores*. Pero para la policía siguen siendo *informantes*.

Para entender el valor de las palabras *vacilar*, *trairagem* y *xisnovear*, es necesario pensarlas como perspectivas. Me estoy refiriendo específicamente al modo en que operan entre los agentes en la Policía Federal de una comisaría de represión al comercio y tráfico de drogas internacional, y afirmando que a través suyo se definen y redefinen los grupos de modo constante, ya que las prácticas y atributos morales que evoca cada uno de esos términos operan como las fisuras de inclusión y exclusión entre quienes se asocian para defender intereses comunes, sea encuadrados en acciones legales o ilegales.

## Lo ilegal como posibilidad de lo legal

Hasta ahora he mostrado cómo la *vacilação*, la *trairagem* y el *xisnovear* pueden comprometer negativamente el valor de la *confianza* en que descansa el secreto, y en el esfuerzo por explicitar su relevancia para los policías puse especial énfasis en el aspecto grupal de las relaciones, dando quizás a entender que tales conceptos tendrían lugar en grupos definidos y hasta cerrados. Sin embargo, también advertí el problema que se les presenta a quienes pertenecen a (o transitan por) diversos circuitos de referencia, que pueden concebirse como amenazantes unos para los otros. Aludo aquí a personas que, aunque constituyen una red que para algunos de sus miembros puede caracterizarse como grupo, no definen su participación como exclusiva. En estas situaciones las fronteras pueden ser móviles y las consecuencias variadas.

Es sabido que el trabajo de la Policía Federal en Brasil se conoce mucho más que el de otras policías por recurrir a investigaciones secretas. Sobre todo, porque en ella recae la responsabilidad de investigar a los propios funcionarios públicos, lo que instituye su poder y al mismo tiempo el temor que genera. Existen dos tipos de información. Uno proveniente de la *inteligencia* policial y el otro estrictamente policial. El puente con la justicia lo establece la *información policial* (en casos específicos ésta puede proceder de *inteligencia* y volcarse al *Inquérito Policial* para ser tratada legalmente). Pero lo más común es que los servicios de *inteligencia* obtengan información de diferentes fuentes y la almacene a través del Sistema Brasileño de Inteligencia, sin hacerla ingresar a los *Inquéritos Policiales*. Es un tipo de dato que no siempre está relacionado con acciones delictivas, puede tratarse de dinámicas de inversiones económicas, por ejemplo, por algún sector, grupo o etnia y, en general, sirve para asesorar a la Presidencia de la República en acciones estratégicas. Así, la *información* proveniente de *inteligencia policial* es entendida como aquella que provee elementos para asesorar a alguien en la toma de decisiones. Muchas veces son datos que permiten evaluar la pertinencia de alguna información para ver si corresponde iniciar una investigación con horizonte judicial o no.

Las “escuchas telefónicas” (*grampos*) se constituyen en una vía fundamental, y pueden ser cuestionadas por realizarse, a veces, sin autorización judicial. Por la manera en que se han dado los vínculos entre el Poder Judicial y el Ejecutivo, así como por las características burocráticas que hacen demorar por tiempo indefinido las autorizaciones para realizar actividades investigativas de fenómenos inminentes, hubo situaciones en que

<sup>23</sup> Mantengo el relato en portugués para que no pierda riqueza expresiva y por limitaciones de espacio no se tradujo.

miembros de la Policía Federal tomaron la iniciativa de investigar casos específicos que involucraban a políticos y funcionarios públicos, sin aval judicial. La justificación ofrecida por algunos de sus agentes se sostiene en la sospecha de vínculos protectores entre miembros del Poder Judicial y agentes de gobierno, que entorpecerían las averiguaciones. Pero, en el marco de los códigos de procedimiento legal, obtener la información por fuera de la forma legal invalida cualquier tipo de acción judicial posterior.

Vimos hasta aquí que el secreto policial presupone lógicas de clausura y apertura de circuitos de personas, dentro de las instituciones y en extensión a quienes operan por fuera de ella, como los *informantes*. Ahora bien, si buena parte de los procedimientos de investigación policial está basada en el *secreto*, incluso al punto de que las informaciones con las que se cuenta no puedan ser utilizadas judicialmente como pruebas por la forma en que han sido obtenidas, cabe preguntarse ¿por qué se insiste entonces en desarrollar actividades que no tendrán consecuencias judiciales a futuro? Según los entrevistados este tipo de información, una vez en manos de la policía, opera con la lógica del rehén: liberarla como denuncia o mantenerla en sigilo tiene un costo.

“Tengo una investigación de un millón de reales en mis manos”, afirmó un *delegado* en una ocasión, “sólo que a mí me interesa ver a esa gente presa, y no el dinero que esos datos me puedan dar... vivo muy bien con mi sueldo y tengo una excelente educación moral”, aclaró, colocándose fuera de las prácticas de quienes “se cambian de bando para el lado del mal” contribuyendo con lo que se conoce como *corrupción*, clasificada dentro de la policía como *blanca y negra*. La *corrupción negra* sería la que implica redes con poder en la estructura del estado y fuera de ella, orientadas al enriquecimiento ilícito a través de prácticas que pueden comprometer la vida y la libertad de las personas. La *corrupción blanca* es descrita como puntual, de corto alcance o circunstancial, iniciativa de pequeñas asociaciones de personas e inclusive individual. La consideran en cierto modo inocua por no afectar valores fundamentales como la libertad, la vida y la propiedad a grandes escalas.

El cómo opera este liminar en el que lo secreto, lo ilegal y lo legal conviven, quedó en cierto modo claro para mí el día que me contaron que un agente con quien charlaba cotidianamente había sido asaltado, cerca de la media noche, en la puerta de su casa, volviendo de un paseo con su esposa y sus hijos. Ingresaba minutos después que su compañera al edificio cuando fue interceptado por dos personas armadas que pretendían robarle el celular y el dinero. Su reacción espontánea lo llevó a sacar el arma, gesto al que reaccionaron los asaltantes disparándole a una de sus piernas. Ya en el suelo, malherido, activó la pistola y anunciándose como policía federal, apretó el gatillo, acertando la bala en uno de los asaltantes. En el revuelo los dos muchachos huyeron. Según el agente no había nadie en la calle. Pocos minutos después lo socorrieron y se recuperó. Cuando tuve la oportunidad de hablar con él me dijo que seguramente los muchachos no sabían que él era policía a la hora de abordarlo. Por lo que él pudo apreciar no se trataba de *traficantes* por la forma torpe y miedosa en que los jóvenes se manejaron con el arma pequeña. Recordemos que el agente trabajaba en una comisaría especializada en represión al tráfico de drogas, con lo que un impacto de esta naturaleza podría ser interpretado dentro de la lógica de represalias por posibles investigaciones en curso. De cualquier manera, nada es casualidad para la policía, y si las víctimas son los colegas, toda una maquinaria investigativa puede ponerse en marcha para esclarecer un caso. Comenzaron revisitando el lugar y hablando con los vecinos, quienes se rehusaron a hacer cualquier comentario por miedo. Uno de los agentes que me contó la historia afirmó:

“Nosotros vamos a averiguar quién fue. Las personas no quieren hablar para no quedar involucradas formalmente en procesos judiciales como testigos, pero nosotros sabemos cómo hacer para saber sin que las personas se vean comprometidas. Tenemos informantes. Y lo vamos a encontrar, pero decime vos, a un tipo de esos ¿para qué lo vas a meter preso? No vale la pena”.

Como respuesta demostré con mis gestos que no confiaba en la resocialización del sistema carcelario. Fue entonces cuando mi interlocutor me miró con cierta ternura y me dijo: “claro, ustedes los antropólogos piensan que se los puede tratar, pero esta gente no tiene arreglo”. En mi ingenuidad no me di cuenta que su opción

era aniquilarlo. Este dato es relevante porque muestra la vigencia de un orden en el que prevalece una idea de justicia que está por fuera de la forma legal, orden que está tramado en ella desde el momento en que los modos de averiguación de la verdad descansan en procedimientos secretos de diferente alcance, legítimos en la institución policial, a pesar de ser a veces ilegales. De hecho, lo que pudo saberse sobre el asalto y el disparo, fue por información de investigación sigilosa, no registrada ni monitoreada judicialmente.

Los policías de a poco fueron juntando pistas: quiénes habían visto a los jóvenes, la dirección en la que se habían orientado, el morro en el que vivían... hasta que finalmente llegaron al lugar. El caso había resonado en la *favela*, debido a que uno de los muchachos ingresó sangrando y ambos comentaron que habían herido a un policía. En los códigos que separan *bandidos* (término utilizado comúnmente para referirse a quienes desarrollan actividades ilegales) y *policías*, si bien herir o matar a un policía es algo que se trata de evitar debido a los costos posteriores que acarrea, en situaciones de confrontación puede definir la reputación de la persona dentro de una *facción* o *comando*, al punto de permitirle ascensos en la jerarquía. En este caso, el muchacho que atacó al policía tenía relación con el *comando* que controlaba el tráfico en la *favela*, pero no trabajaba en rigor para él. A través de informantes y de indagaciones *sigilosas* se obtuvo información relevante que posibilitó alinear las acciones formales de investigación, abrir un *Inquérito Policial* y dar seguimiento a las acusaciones. No toda la información que habían obtenido sería necesaria para iniciar el procedimiento formal. Como más tarde supe, parte de ella quedó como base para otras posibles indagaciones. Quizás, inclusive, como “mercancía” de negociación. A los pocos meses las dos personas fueron encontradas, verificándose que ya tenían antecedentes criminales, siendo que uno de ellos estaba prófugo y el otro en libertad condicional.

El concepto de “mercancía política” es propicio para comprender el lugar de la información que no integra formalmente los *IPs*, porque se refiere a toda mercancía cuya producción o reproducción depende de la combinación de costos y recursos políticos, para producir un valor de cambio político o económico (Misse 2005). Tiene valor en un mercado que se opone a cualquier reglamentación estatal o pública y se reproduce en circuitos restringidos de intereses y asociaciones. En el caso del policía asaltado el objetivo era concreto y de corto alcance. Pero cuando se trata de investigaciones más amplias, la *información* adquiere otro valor, en la medida que se torna una especie de carnada para obtener más *información*. También algunos agentes policiales sostienen que cuando ésta se consigue por medios sigilosos potencia los resultados positivos que pueden obtenerse en un *interrogatorio*. Suelen justificarlo considerando que poner esa información en manos de la justicia acarrea el riesgo de que se sepa, a través de los deslices en el ámbito judicial, que existen investigaciones en marcha y que, en consecuencia, pueda interrumpirse o reprogramarse el curso de una acción ilegal. Toda la *información* tratada en forma secreta carece de evidencia judicial. Su ámbito de validez está dado por otros principios que a veces son subsidiarios de la investigación legal.

En una de las últimas visitas que hice a la *delegacia*, el sub-jefe de operaciones, un hombre de unos 60 años, formado en la escuela de policía antes de las reformas, me obligó a reflexionar un poco. Yo ya había establecido cierta proximidad con varias personas en aquel espacio, y solía andar por los pasillos internos, generalmente para ir a la cocina a buscar agua o café, lugar en que se daban charlas distendidas y variadas, con diferentes agentes. A pesar de mi insistencia, el sub-jefe de operaciones jamás me concedió una entrevista y siempre hizo lo que pudo para manifestar la antipatía que le generaba mi presencia. El hecho de que mi autorización hubiera sido concedida por los *delegados*, que eran sus jefes, no le permitía impedir que yo estuviera. Sin embargo, la tensión que me hacía sentir afirmaba, a mi entender, la división que existe entre los agentes y los *delegados* en el ámbito de la policía, como dos instancias de saber y de hacer. El primero, ligado directamente al conocimiento policial y a la calle, y el segundo, al jurídico y a la burocracia. Con ese gesto él me situaba en el lugar de los extraños como amenaza, y se resistía a ser un “informante”.

No estaba dispuesto a colaborar con mi investigación, desde el momento en que, vista desde su perspectiva, toda investigación se desarrolla con el objetivo de interrumpir una acción incorrecta o ilegal, y corregir una conducta. Sus proyecciones eran de ese tenor, y en ellas se fundaba buena parte de sus sospechas.

El episodio fue muy significativo cuando, en la ausencia de otros policías, el sub-jefe, al ver que me orientaba hacia la cocina, me dijo, como quien le habla a un extraño que se equivocó al entrar: “¿A dónde se dirige?”. Me llamó la atención la pregunta porque por meses él me había visto hacer ese recorrido, y le respondí intimidada que siempre iba a la cocina a almorzar con las chicas del *cartório*, a lo que él replicó: “Antes era así, pero de ahora en adelante su lugar es de acá para allá, este [señalando el espacio interno y no de tránsito] es un espacio reservado a la policía”. Nunca llegué a ser confiable para él. Aquel límite territorial abrigaba el concepto de secreto, pues mostraba la forma de preservar el ambiente que lo custodia. Yo podía entenderlo porque había presenciado un interrogatorio, sintiendo en carne y hueso el peso de las palabras intercambiadas.

## Lo que guarda el secreto

“this review considers how recent developments in the anthropology of secrecy reflect epistemological and ethical dimensions of cultural anthropology more broadly... I argue that attending to ethnographic accounts of the way secrets travel across different media and coexist simultaneously in various mediated states provides both a novel intellectual framework for surveying recent research and a basis for conceptualizing the anthropology of secrecy itself as a potentially recursive practice of knowledge transposition”, Graham Jones, *Annual Review* 2014, p. 54.

Considerando los aspectos hasta aquí descritos, es de interés sociológico que, cuando los policías se refieren al trabajo *sigiloso*, hacen pública la forma en que determinadas informaciones son obtenidas, así como qué clase y qué tipo de universos relacionan. Los contenidos, lo secreto, varían entre datos específicos sobre personas, relaciones, acciones, que son investigadas, y momentos, lugares y personas que están investigando. En general se resisten a hablar de los operativos pasados y de las investigaciones concluidas, porque no quieren que se hagan públicas las formas en que investigan. Siempre que se organizan *operativos* a cargo de diferentes *grupos de investigación*<sup>24</sup> dentro de la *delegacia*, no existe un conocimiento detallado mutuo sobre lo que está realizando cada uno de los *grupos*. “Cuanto menos uno sepa aquí es mejor”, afirmaba un *escrivão*, “porque al saber uno ya asume responsabilidad: de trabajar bajo sigilo si es que sabe por vía formal, y de mantener el sigilo y sufrir las consecuencias de saber, cuando se entera de manera informal”. Entrar en conocimiento de ciertas informaciones produce una complicidad que se establece al enredarse en la trama de las historias contadas (Schapp, 1992).

Inclusive, como ellos afirman, ya sucedió de haber dos *grupos* investigando organizaciones de tráfico, que se encuentran y, sin proponérselo, terminan reuniendo a los diferentes equipos en los mismos lugares. Porque el secreto es constitutivo también del trabajo interno policial, no simplemente hacia afuera. Para garantizar la eficacia de los *operativos* cada equipo custodia lo que sabe, *compartimenta* la información, lo que permite mantener la red con otros centros policiales del país, y hasta con otros países. Cuando se investigan dinámicas y personas es preciso que determinados datos circulen, para poder proyectar cierto dominio territorial en función de producir una detención en *flagrante delito*. Para ello, agrupamientos específicos en diferentes *delegacias* comparten datos entre ellos. Es un intercambio muy puntual que no se hace extensivo a la *delegacia* como un todo, así como tampoco suelen participar de sus contenidos los agentes del ámbito judicial.

24 Aquí el término nativo “grupo” apenas evoca una forma de organización del trabajo, basada en un número determinado de personas que se reúnen con objetivos de investigación específicos bajo la supervisión de un jefe policía de operativos quien, a su vez, debe mantener al tanto al delegado. No connota la carga conceptual sociológica que más arriba se discutía.

Aunque no podría establecer en este momento el tenor del sigilo al interior de la *delegacia*, puedo afirmar que agrupamientos de policías federales organizados en un sector apoyado por la *Drugs Enforcement Administration* (DEA), suelen desarrollar tareas de las cuales poco conocimiento llegan a adquirir los agentes que componen el *Núcleo de Operaciones* de la *delegacia* especializada a la que me refiero, y que pueden superponerse incluso con las investigaciones que en ésta se llevan a cabo. Trabajan con metas anuales y se desempeñan sólo en tres o cuatro lugares del país, considerados estratégicos para la investigación del *narcotráfico*. Existen casos en que la unidad de este sector abre *Inquéritos Policiales* y se registran en la *delegacia* especializada con un número específico de Orden de Misión (documento que da inicio a ciertas actividades policiales) y luego entre el coordinador de la unidad y el *delegado* se decide en cuál de los ámbitos se estabilizará la indagación de ese caso para seguir su camino investigativo. Por las características de autonomía relativa con la que esta unidad trabaja, los *operativos* suelen ser más ágiles.<sup>25</sup> Pero no siempre ni necesariamente la información que se obtiene en este ámbito es compartida con los agentes de la *delegacia*.

Por otra parte, el hecho de que la DEA esté involucrada en las acciones nacionales de investigación a través de los agentes que conforman la unidad, puede generar ciertas rispideces. Nos acercamos así al tema del *espionaje*, que consiste en infiltraciones de agentes de otras organizaciones dentro de la policía. Pueden presentarse como meros informantes y buscar datos para colaborar con otras instituciones que establezcan competencia. Una expresión con la que se hace referencia a quienes se ocupan de tales tareas es *pé de pluma*. Se las llama así por las formas sutiles, casi sin hacerse sentir, en que estas personas se aproximan y van ingresando en el ambiente policial hasta conseguir determinadas informaciones. En dichos procedimientos el *espía* puede, llegado el momento y dado el escenario de confiabilidad, revelar su condición y proceder al intercambio de informaciones de manera recíproca, alterando el código de reserva del *espionaje*.

El *secreto* opera así en varios niveles del trabajo policial, revelando su centralidad sociológica al articular relaciones, disolverlas, recrearlas, y al mismo tiempo al custodiar formas de hacer investigación que comprometen diferentes tipos de *información*. En el nivel investigativo las “escuchas telefónicas”, por ejemplo, se constituyen en una herramienta fundamental. Los agentes pasan días enteros siguiendo las conversaciones que se dan entre las personas monitoreadas por sospecha de haber cometido algún crimen. Insisto en que suelen ser en extremo cuestionadas por realizarse, en ciertos casos, sin autorización judicial. Las conversaciones se graban y transcriben para ser utilizadas como fundamento de los interrogatorios. A través de lo que llaman *técnicas de interrogación*, se busca probar por boca del interrogado aquello que se conoce de antemano. Los policías no revelan la vía por la cual obtienen tales informaciones, tampoco enuncian lo que saben, sino que apenas lo insinúan para conseguir que sea formulado por la persona interrogada.

Observando un *interrogatorio* con un detenido en delito flagrante noté que las preguntas iban haciendo evidente cuál es el modo de confirmar y de obtener *informaciones*. El *delegado*, escritorio de por medio, se disponía a escribir en una computadora lo que fuera dicho por el detenido. El agente que había participado de la prisión lo interrogaba en un tono consistente:

Agente: Si vos no das nada la cosa no camina... te estás abriendo, ¡pero no te estás abriendo del todo!

Delegado: Si no querés no hables, y nos vamos todos a casa... pero si vos nos ayudás nosotros también te podemos ayudar.

Agente: ¿Cómo se llama el tipo que te dio la droga? ¡Decínos cómo se llama de una vez! ¡Es que vos no estás entendiendo que nosotros ya sabemos todo! ¡Hablá y no nos hagás perder más el tiempo!

En muchos casos los agentes saben, pero en otros no, y simplemente dicen saber para que la persona se sienta expuesta y confiese por temor. Lo que diga, sea aquello que se espera confirmar como aquello nuevo,

<sup>25</sup> Además de contar con recursos financieros propios que le son asignados por la agencia norteamericana, no está sujeto a tantos procedimientos burocráticos que sí caracterizan el trabajo dentro de la delegacia de policía encuadrada estrictamente en las formas del Estado brasileño.

es valorizado por la policía. Se parte de una base de conocimiento obtenido por vía sigilosa a través de los teléfonos, o mejor dicho, de los relatos que les acercan a los agentes quienes se encargan de escuchar, de seguir historias sin fin que se traman a partir de los diálogos oídos en las cabinas. A pesar de que el trabajo en “escuchas” no suele ser de los más valorizados debido al tedio que todos dicen que lo caracteriza, quienes lo hacen pueden compenetrarse al punto de adquirir un conocimiento minucioso de los movimientos, acompañado de expectativas que se crean en función de un desenlace imaginado. En este proceso de entrar en la vida de otros para poder interrumpir el recorrido de la droga, los policías afirman que el investigador se involucra al punto que siente que vive la vida del otro, se desplaza de sí para poder pensar como él, para poder construir hipótesis sobre cuáles serían los próximos pasos.

De una comunicación vigilada pueden nacer investigaciones que den lugar a otros *Inquéritos Policiales*. A aquel que encuadra las *escuchas* de las que surgen las pistas a seguir en otras investigaciones se lo llama, utilizando una elocuente metáfora reproductiva, *Inquérito Mãe* (inquérito madre). A partir de él pueden pedirse medidas cautelares que apuntan a interrumpir un hecho programado. Una vez que la situación es intervenida a través de la *información* que se obtiene de las *escuchas* sigilosas y que todo lo que fue realizado en la fase de la investigación contenida en el *IP es relatado* en un informe explicitando el tipo de pruebas que se obtuvieron, se eleva al Ministerio Público, y si el informe es aceptado como conclusivo, se adjunta al *inquérito madre* como anexo, y sigue su curso hacia la evaluación por parte de los jueces.

Aunque de manera no plenamente explícita, los investigadores hacen una distinción entre *información* e *inteligencia*. La primera sólo adquiere sentido cuando ingresa en una narrativa articulada de hechos pasados y futuros, a través del lugar que ocupan en un ordenamiento de pruebas e hipótesis. La *inteligencia* podría ser entendida como la capacidad selectiva del investigador, por la cual la *información* se vuelve significativa para alguien y para algo. Para los policías, reunir informaciones constituye un tipo de raciocinio. Tanto lo que se sabe, como el criterio para jerarquizarlo, exige un riguroso sigilo. El investigador tiene que buscar el máximo dominio sobre el material que utiliza. Pero eso nunca es un trabajo solitario.

En el trasfondo de estas políticas del *secreto* vale resaltar que la *confianza* se yergue como un valor moral central que expone de manera tajante el aspecto emocional que lo constituye. De acuerdo con Balbi “así como su contenido moral y sus sentidos, la carga emocional de los valores morales es producto de determinados procesos sociales y está vinculada a ciertos contextos institucionales y a ciertos entramados de relaciones sociales” (2007: 82). Toda la red policial se sostiene en relaciones de confianza, siendo la desconfianza, en consecuencia, un principio activo que está como preámbulo de todo vínculo nuevo. Resulta interesante notar que el lugar del *informante* descansa en la confiabilidad de la información que proporciona, pero no exactamente en la confianza en la persona, como valor. Como ya fue apuntado, el vínculo con el *informante* puede ser apenas circunstancial.

Cuando los *informantes* estrechan sus relaciones con los agentes policiales por periodos considerables de tiempo la distancia tiende también a reducirse y, en su reducción extrema, ya ha ocasionado que estas personas transiten por los espacios físicos internos de la comisaría, acompañando a veces el trabajo policial y hasta desarrollando tareas propiamente policiales. Inclusive, los mismos policías afirman que en algunos casos existe un involucramiento afectivo con ellos, que hace difícil establecer distancia cuando ya finalizaron las actividades que originaron el vínculo. En los procesos investigativos la figura clave del *informante* es la encarnación de la ambigüedad, porque está precisamente en el lugar liminal que propicia la disolución de la frontera entre lo legal y lo ilegal.<sup>26</sup> En él se expresa la continuidad entre estos dos universos que se formulan

<sup>26</sup> Vale la pena mencionar aquí otro procedimiento común que caracteriza también una figura ambigua en el ámbito carcelario. Se trata del lugar que ocupan los llamados *limpieza* de las cárceles. En el caso de las prisiones brasileñas, los *faxina* son personas con condenas de mucho tiempo que van creando relaciones de confianza y les van siendo atribuidas determinadas tareas dentro de la organización carcelaria. Son personas que se definen por su liminalidad, presos condenados que contribuyen con el mantenimiento del orden, llevan y traen información dentro de la institución, manejan llaves en algunos casos, correspondencia, y otros aspectos e informaciones que trascienden los dos ámbitos de la cárcel: los internos y la administración carcelaria. Ver, para el caso argentino, Ojeda y Medina (2011), y Caldeira (2004) y Castro e Silva (2006) para el caso brasileño.



como radicalmente separados. Porque en él también reposa la forma del secreto. El *informante* se transforma en una persona con poder, porque tiene la autoridad para trasvasar la línea que separa los dos ámbitos. Y por el mismo motivo, nunca es una persona de plena confianza. En la verticalidad que caracteriza el vínculo puede ser confiable lo que diga, pero difícilmente podrá constituirse en *hombre de confianza*. Esta condición lo mantendrá siempre en la liminalidad, no llegando a integrar completamente los circuitos para los cuales dispone la información, y en caso de extremar la proximidad puede ser visto como elemento de riesgo por aquellos miembros de la institución que defiendan las prácticas más legales.

Elias Canetti afirma que el detentor de poder

que se vale del secreto, lo conoce con precisión y sabe muy bien evaluarlo de acuerdo a su significado. Sabe dónde echar el ojo cuando quiere conseguir algo, y sabe a quién de sus auxiliares emplear para ello. Siendo muchos sus deseos, él posee muchos secretos, y los reúne en un sistema en el cual ellos se guardan unos a los otros. Confía una cosa a uno, otra a otro, y cuida para que sus confidentes jamás puedan unirse (1997: 292).

Podríamos decir que el secreto en sí se realiza plenamente en su publicidad irrestricta, porque es cuando se adquiere conciencia generalizada de aquello que permaneció oculto, cuando se revela. En el caso de la policía, el papel de los medios de comunicación es crucial porque hace públicas las redes que custodiaban lo secreto. Claro que aún en ese momento de divulgación existe una selección de lo que será expuesto, y que responde a las propiedades de las relaciones políticas que abarcan los fenómenos que envuelven a las instituciones públicas, a sus funcionarios y a la población involucrada en las informaciones que publican.

## Reflexiones finales

Hasta aquí traté de hacer visible el lugar que ocupa el *secreto* dentro de la Policía Federal en la capital de un estado de Brasil. Este esfuerzo se basó en las recurrentes afirmaciones de que, para el trabajo policial, el *secreto* constituye la piedra angular del éxito investigativo. Para ello fue necesario hacer referencia a las relaciones que aseguran la preservación y la difusión del *secreto*, y a los valores con contenidos morales y emocionales en el ambiente específico en que los agentes crean sentido sobre su desempeño profesional y sobre la institución a la que pertenecen. Hemos visto que la separación entre el ámbito de las prácticas ilegales y el de las legales, creada desde la perspectiva estatal a través de los códigos penales y procesales, se presenta de manera borrosa, y por momentos ausente, debido a las relaciones dinámicas que los agentes establecen entre ellos, más allá de lo estrictamente institucional, en una red en la que es difícil trazar los límites. Una serie de conceptos (*informante*, *X9*, *traíra*) permite evaluar la acción en un contexto con alto grado de normatividad formal, como es la Policía Federal, caracterizado a su vez, y paradójicamente, por prácticas informales que de modo permanente median entre lo ilegal y lo legal, con la convicción en sus agentes de que estos procedimientos elevan siempre el rendimiento del trabajo policial.

Pienso el trabajo antropológico a la luz de los datos expuestos que revelan el lugar singular que ocupa el *secreto* para el trabajo policial, en tanto valor con agencia que crea y recrea relaciones al interior de la institución y hacia afuera de ella, garantizando confianza en los vínculos y en las informaciones. Al reunir los términos “investigación” y “secreto”, algo puede resultarnos familiar y llevarnos como mínimo a comparar dos posibles epistemologías: la policial basada en la certeza de que existe una verdad a ser descubierta a través del desplazamiento de los sujetos hacia los objetos y contextos; y la antropológica, que relega a un lugar periférico la noción de verdad fáctica, para abrir paso al registro y comprensión de todo aquello que permite a los nativos reconocer la existencia de una verdad, y desarrollar métodos y técnicas que permitan alcanzarla, teniendo en

cuenta que en tal iniciativa la red de relaciones se configura, se afirma o se disuelve. En función de este auto descentramiento, la noción de secreto nativa puede entrar en diálogo con la propia del antropólogo y derivar en un efecto reflexivo.

Como resultado de diferentes debates sobre el contenido de este artículo, me propuse explicitar algunos tópicos que están en la base de la lectura de los datos propuestos aquí. Tratándose de un fenómeno de difícil aprehensión como es “lo secreto”, hice un esfuerzo para captar no sólo su forma, sino también las consecuencias de sus movimientos. Para esto me vi obligada a suspender la tendencia, no sólo subjetiva en este caso, a pensar que “lo secreto” (el contenido) sería tan relevante cuanto “el secreto” (la forma), sino más.

La pregunta de cómo trabajar la cuestión del secreto y de lo secreto ha estado vinculada a menudo al estudio de rituales religiosos (Barth, 1975), pero también a diversas prácticas consideradas tabúes, inclusive en la misma sociedad de la que el etnógrafo forma parte (Zenobi, 2010; Guber, 2007; Miranda, 2001; Sirimarco, 2012). En el caso aquí analizado, el *secreto* se constituye columna vertebral de las actividades investigativas policiales. Pareciera paradójico pretender estudiar aquello que desde el vamos se presenta interdicto. Sin embargo, atender al secreto como “forma” es de hecho mucho más revelador que el esfuerzo por conocer sus contenidos. Nos puede ayudar el dejar de lado la idea de que la investigación etnográfica se orienta a “descubrimientos” o “revelaciones”, que se vuelven a veces fijaciones cuando identificamos que hay algo que se nos oculta, algo más que por ventura podría ser clave para explicar casi todo.

La discusión desarrollada por Giobellina Brumana acerca del trabajo de Marcel Griaule sobre los *dogon* pone de relieve el tratamiento metodológico que éste hizo de la dimensión del secreto, al resaltar que la revelación que él buscaba sólo afirmaba el valor que tales informaciones tendrían para él, desatendiendo su lugar e importancia para los propios nativos (Giobellina, 2005: 258, 2006). Este inspirador trabajo nos acompaña en la afirmación de que los secretos son relativos, no existen de forma absoluta, pues “toda política de sigilo es apenas el anverso y el reverso de una política de comunicación” (Barros, Vogel y Mello, 1998: 165. Mi traducción). En el acto de ocultar, siempre se revela algo.

Entonces, importaría menos *lo secreto*, en tanto contenido (dato ocultado o divulgado), que *el secreto*: forma que custodia relaciones y cosas para preservar, destruir o reconfigurar determinado orden social en el tiempo. Esta manera de hacer etnografía nos permite mayor aproximación a fenómenos difusos de las formas de gobernar y administrar las instituciones contemporáneas, e incluso la elucidación posible de los mismos. Más allá de la indignación que, como ciudadanos, nos pueden provocar las prácticas que a menudo consideramos injustas en el marco del Estado de Derecho al que idealmente adherimos. El secreto de observar las formas públicas de *lo secreto* resulta de llevar a cabo una antropología de la investigación policial.

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# Delivering bad news: family members who have survived armed conflicts in the trauma hospital

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## Abstract

Ethnographic research in a trauma hospital made it possible to systematically accompany one of the families who have survived armed conflicts. We observed, in the work process of the Intensive Care Unit, how a body between life and death is revealed through the interactions between health professionals and family members. It is perceived that the “delivering bad news” perspective suppresses the effects produced by state practices of life and death management, in contexts of criminalization of violence reiterated in the daily routine of the trauma hospital. To rectify responses based on biology and protocol, we adopted the epistemological perspective of anthropology and social psychology. This study has shown that the discursive practices reproduced the dynamics of social inequality linked to racism and classism, while families from precarious territorialities constantly experience traumatic situations and imminent grief for violent health problems.

**Key words:** communicating bad news; violence; health; racism; classism.

# Dando más notícias: familiares que sobreviveram a conflitos armados no hospital de trauma

## Resumo

A pesquisa etnográfica em um hospital de trauma possibilitou o acompanhamento sistemático de uma das famílias sobreviventes de conflitos armados. Observamos, no processo de trabalho da Unidade de Terapia Intensiva, como um corpo entre a vida e a morte se revela nas interações entre profissionais de saúde e familiares. Percebe-se que a perspectiva da “comunicação de más notícias» suprime os efeitos produzidos pelas práticas estatais de gestão da vida e da morte, em contextos de criminalização da violência reiterados no cotidiano do hospital de traumas. Para problematizar a centralidade de entendimentos com base na perspectiva biológica e protocolar, adotamos a perspectiva epistemológica da antropologia e da psicologia social. Este estudo evidenciou que as práticas discursivas reproduziram a dinâmica da desigualdade social atrelada ao racismo e ao classismo, enquanto famílias advindas de territorialidades precárias vivenciam constantemente situações traumáticas e o luto iminente por agravos em saúde produzidos pela violência.

**Palavras-Chave:** comunicação más notícias; violência; saúde; racismo; classismo.

# Delivering bad news: family members who have survived armed conflicts in the trauma hospital

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## Introduction

The present article, inspired by the doctoral thesis<sup>1</sup>, discusses the therapeutic itineraries to one of the families who have survived armed conflicts in a trauma hospital, in order to problematize the management of life and death; understanding how to reveal the person between life and death to family members who have survived armed conflicts.

The ways in which family members are supported through their suffering and the care flows for their health demands allow us to observe the effects produced by state practices, in contexts of criminalization of violence and reiterated on the daily routine of the trauma hospital. We chose “delivering bad news” as an approach for this analysis since, by subverting its conceptual scope originally linked to a technique- and biology-based tendency, it highlights the moral values involved in the care practices that position men as more or less deserving of care. Also, the conditions to recognize the pain, trauma and impending mourning of some families from precarious territories are emphasized in this way.

Visiting in the trauma hospital dwell in temporalities that intersect families and institutional pathways (Godói, 2017), such as distressing waits, corridors, and vagueness generated by the mechanisms of discipline on which hospital institutions are based. The intelligibility of violence, marked in the body, occurs to the extent of the possibility of its translation by the professionals in terms of the disease, fragmented in its biological, psychic and social dimensions (Sarti et al., 2006; Deslandes, 2001). That means that the access and support of visitors in the daily service of the hospital make the suffering for the imminent loss of a family member clear, in its difficult assessment and management by the health professionals. The violence that afflicts a son, a brother, a father, produces a subjective mark in those who wait day after day for the delivering of good (or bad) news from the health team.

There is a considerable amount of research, mainly epidemiological, on juvenile homicide victimization. However, Brazil still lacks studies on how the families of victims experience this loss, and, no less traumatic, the unsuccessful homicide attempts. The impacts on the physical and mental health of family members are strongly emphasized in literature, pointing to the need for greater involvement of the health sector, especially concerning collective health.

As Walsh and McGoldrick (1998) warn, deaths such as homicide disproportionately affect more impoverished regions, traumatizing an entire community. Special attention must be paid to the revictimization factors that intersect families’ grieving process. While waiting for support and comfort, many families end up in situations of neglect, invisibility, and professional unpreparedness.

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Although it is difficult to assess the extent of the impact homicide has on the lives of those close to the victims, a US study estimates that each death affects 7 to 10 family members, as well as friends, co-workers, and neighbors (Redmond, 1989). The relatives and/or friends of the homicide victim are usually referred to in many studies, according to the Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima/ Portuguese Association for Victim Support (2012) and Costa Harth, et al. (2017) as “hidden victims”, or “the other victims” or even “co-victims”. Such nomenclatures preserve the idea that, even if these people have not suffered the homicide directly, they are also indirect victims of this violence.

The therapeutic itineraries experienced by visiting family members become unforgettable for them; these moments can either be remembered as a support of care, or foster trauma recrudescence and the medium- and long- term possibility of the elaboration of mourning (Gallego, Gomes & Peres, 2022). International studies, and to a lesser extent national studies, show that loss by homicide usually generates significant short- and long-term consequences for the victims’ relatives and friends. It can trigger serious health problems, such as pictures of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (Soares, Miranda, Borges, 2006; Zinzow et al., 2011; Mastrocinque, 2015 Connolly, Gordon, 2015). It is also correlated with a higher risk for smoking and alcohol and drug abuse (Vieira et al., 2009). It changes the family dynamics and the relationship with the community. (Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima, 2012)

We call the suffering of these family members in the context of hospital emergency services as “Corridor suffering”: subjects who constantly and for lengthy periods of time need to search for tangible information about the health-disease process. It is customary for visitors to wait daily for contact with the local reference team, especially doctors, about the health status of their family members. The corridors of the hospitals surveyed are unsanitary places, with no access to food and potable water on all floors.

It is important to contextualize that the main objective of the doctoral research that gave rise to the case study below sought to understand the practices of health professionals and public security professionals inside trauma hospitals to men injured by violent conflicts. In trauma hospitals, the systematic monitoring of different health professionals (by civil service examination or residency in medicine, psychology, social work, nursing, and dentistry, and nurse technicians), as well as public security professionals (prison guards, military police, civilian police, and security guards outsourced by the services), was carried out through health care flows in various departments (emergency rooms, wards, intensive care unit/ICU).

Chosen as a methodological tool, ethnography made visible aspects denied by the institutions involved and ignored by other research methods (Fassin, 2017), seeking to overcome the notion of the subjects’ individuality and to offer a larger picture of the power devices involved in public policies.

The research lasted 4 months, between 10 to 20 hours per week at Hospital Pronto Socorro (HPS) and Hospital Cristo Redentor located in the city of Porto Alegre/RS during 2018 and 2019. Open interviews were conducted with managers and professionals, however, field diary entries were the main method used, since the variety of professionals, departments involved, and the fast decision-making flows in the care process around health users injured by violent conflicts and their families made it possible to analyze new points of view on the theme.

The main findings of the doctoral research were deepened through current studies in the field of Social Psychology and Anthropology. From the analysis of masculinities from an intersectional and feminist perspective, we have realized that for men marked as “being of crime”, the suffering produced by the trauma experienced is not only made invisible; it is taken as a sign of dangerousness. This dynamic governs the relationships between masculinities involved in violent conflict and produces resentment as the central affection. (Santos; Nardi , 2021a).

We conclude that the hospital is tightly associated to the public security device through discursive practices that foster criminalized masculinities. (Santos, Nardi 2021b). The devices of power operate in the providing of care when health and public security policies co-habit the emergency health instruments. This led us to analyze how the operationalization of care can produce the precariousness of lives that, when they are not physically decimated, are socially decimated. To this end, poststructuralists such as Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Loic Wacquant, Didier Fassin, and Judith Butler conferred on the ethnographic research process problematizations related to the criminalization and medicalization mechanisms that act on certain male bodies in this context. (Santos; Nardi, 2019).

Through certain groups of intelligibility, sustained in hierarchical positions of knowledge-power,<sup>2</sup> among health professionals and between health professionals and visitors, we observed that the measurement of pain is the naturalized violence in the trauma hospital. Sônia Maluf (2005) states that the public powers are absent as interlocutors, forcing those affected to retain their own pain in the sphere of the intimate and private. They act as if the confinement of violence, along with seclusion and muteness, were their only acceptable and possible place. However, 'pain' can also vividly express a story, just as 'suffering' can be silent or present without language.

Thus, in the present article, inseparable from the aforementioned textual productions around the thesis, the objective of this study is based on the tragedy experienced by the nuclear and extended family of brothers Marlon and David. We chose to divide the article into two subsections that highlight the main findings around the theme of accompanying family members who have survived armed conflicts.

The first one contextualizes the approaches conducted by the researcher when visiting Marlon and David's family, in the context of the Intensive Care Unit of the Hospital de Pronto Socorro of Porto Alegre. We can understand why the concept of "delivering bad news", in its origin and main assumptions given by biomedicine or even studies in collective health, becomes derisory in integral health care, since the social markers of race and social class produce inequalities in access to the support and follow-up of family members that escape any protocol action.

Bad news has been defined as any information involving a drastic change in the future outlook in a negative sense. (Fontes, Menezes, Borgato & Luiz, 2017). In healthcare, traditionally, examples of delivering bad news include the diagnosis of life-threatening illnesses, amputation, communication concerning the death of a family member, or even illnesses interfering with the quality of life (Camargo et al, 2019; Vogel et al., 2019).

It was specifically in the field of palliative care that the delivering of bad news became an issue in the field of medical sciences. Robert Buckman developed the *SPIKES* Protocol in 1992. The *SPIKES* Protocol<sup>3</sup> is the most widespread internationally, and establishes a technique divided into six steps (Setting Up the Interview; Perception; Invitation; Knowledge; Emotions; Strategy and Summary).

According to the aforementioned authors, mainly from the medical and nursing fields, this would be a vital therapeutic tool that would guarantee the strengthening of relationships, greater autonomy and trust in the professional, anxiety reduction, and an improvement in treatment adherence, allowing patients to live better with their illnesses.

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2 Within this scope, in which power and knowledge are intimately linked, what is stressed, therefore, is that "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Foucault, 1995: 29-30).

3 The process involved in delivering bad news aims to achieve four fundamental purposes: the first consists in identifying what the patient knows and thinks about his situation, as well as analyzing his expectations, in order to prepare him for what he is about to hear; the second purpose is to provide the patient with accessible information for his understanding, while considering his needs and wishes; the third is characterized by offering support through mechanisms that soften the emotional shock and withdrawal experienced by the receiver of the bad news; finally, the last purpose is based on the creation of a treatment plan that involves the collaboration and participation of the patient. (Gesser, dos Santos & Gambetta, 2021).

Hospital institutional culture positions the physician as the main responsible for delivering bad news, but we will see that this affects both the interactions with family members and the relationships with the ICU reference team. Medical power is invested, even by health professionals from other areas, as the one who owns the truth and who must promptly give explanations. This contradictorily strengthens even more the hierarchical relationship between the knowledge holders and hinders interdisciplinary health practices.

Current studies draw criticism regarding the *Spikes* protocol as scarce and incomplete in the face of the complexity of care for health users and their families in situations involving crisis in the health care setting. (Gallego, Gomes & Peres, 2022; Fassin 2017; Neto et al., 2013).

Through the observations made, one realizes that delivering news is not actually giving support, and it precedes an information that carries a huge emotional charge and has the potential to change someone's life and perspective. This happens because, in the trauma hospital, subjects are rarely asked directly about their history, the tendency is to create realities about who accesses the health service. The narratives regarding health users cross corridors and departments, informal, virtual and even formal paths (such as spaces for case discussion among health professionals) and are encouraged by various institutional actors, from general service workers and nurse technicians (many of whom come from the same peripheral territories as the health users), to nurses, doctors, and others.

From this, the conditions that allow for the construction of the figures of victim and defendant are established, because, generally, the narratives about subjects in hospitalization are intersected by the process of criminalization of black, poor, and young subjects (Santos; Nardi, 2021a). This process has a direct impact on the care process of these health care users regarded as criminals, as well as on the different senses of interactions between family members and health care professionals, as we will see in this study.

This is when we arrive at the second subsection, deriving out of research observations of the narratives to the problems related to the interdisciplinary work process, that reveals communication as being directly associated with power/knowledge relations involving multiple social actors as part of hospital institutions. It is noticed that discursive practices involving family members sometimes reproduce the dynamics of social inequality with regard to the production of subjectivities considered inferior.

Poor families, from the outskirts, through the reproduced perception of some health professionals, create intelligibilities about what can be talked about and how, since, by having a distinct cultural and social access from the professionals, they are unable to understand or access part of the specialists' knowledge. We will see that situations of revictimization are even more common when the homicide victim was involved in transgressive behavior. (Costa, Njaine & Schenker, 2017). The effects of violence on the family revive previous traumas related to violent situations (Medeiros, 2018) as well as revictimize subjects in their interactions with the hospital institution.

### **Family as a hidden victim amid the ICU work process**

It was supposed to be a Sunday lunch. The aunt (Dulce) quickly brings the family to the table. Amidst the sound of the children's laughter, the older brother, (Marlon, 25) was giving advice to his younger brother (David, 17). Also at the table, the father (Jorge) sat with the resentments that filled a history of estrangement and rapid reconciliations with his son David.

These were David's memories, until he became an ethereal body due to drug trafficking. Working with one of the riskiest weapons and roles: Whatsapp, in communications. The back and forth. Who lives, who must die, who kills whom. Automated.

His brother (Marlon) and his father (Jorge) had already warned David to abandon his role as a drug dealer's scout. His father had already been involved with crime; he knew how things had changed in 10 years. Then, men would solve matters eye to eye:

*“There was a relationship based upon conversation, man to man. There was negotiation: “Oh, I’ll pay on such and such a day, oh, then maybe I’ll move out”. Now, you don’t even know that your death is decreed, sometimes you don’t even have time to escape. It’s all too fast, one sends a Whatsapp to another, and the guy who is in debt, in order to pay it, has to go there and kill the other one, otherwise tomorrow it will be him.”* (Santos; Nardi, 2019, p.67)

Death has become a bargaining chip. So, father and older brother signaled that, as long as David held this role, he could not visit Aunt Dulce. There, the faction is different. The problem is that not everything can be accessed through keys on a cell phone. David only wished to go home and relive what it is to be family. To go through the gates of trafficking, without fear. Courage was all that he possessed that was humane. Courage and stubbornness. Hiding the unprotected boy from the man, the part that owes him.

In the framing of life, boys behaving like men remain little time in the supposed protection of the domestic space. (Santos; Nardi, 2019). He hadn't even had time to sit down at his aunt's table and he was already being called by someone at the gate. David opens the door. It happened so fast when his aunt and older brother pushed him into the house and barricaded the ten shots launched as an execution attempt.

This is the beginning of one of the tragedies that make up the trauma hospital, a place where not physical death stands out, but rather the struggle for life through the acknowledgment of trauma. As Medeiros (2018) explains, in the absence of a language for the enormity of family members' pain there are challenges to “borrow, steal, and create words,” something to offer support. For this reason, shards and conversations, more than narrative genres, are the dialogic constructions of a Research(er). This is the first challenge, to circumscribe the temporalities of a path marked by uncertainty and losses (Vianna, 2021, p.71).

In the inhospitable, unpredictable path of total institutions<sup>4</sup> such as trauma hospitals, while doctors, nurses, and nurse technicians involved in the intense and fast-paced “hard” work were fighting for physical survival, social workers were providing support and follow-up to health users and their families in situations of social vulnerability. These social workers made possible a flow of systematic follow-ups of the researcher in all sectors of inpatient and emergency health care.

It was in the small room of the Social Service team that I was introduced to Marlon's father and stepmother, and after that I started to systematically accompany the family visits in the Intensive Care Unit for about 1 month/4 times a week, during visiting hours in one of the ICUs of the HPS. There were several contexts within the research: observations and conversations in the room of the healthcare technicians of the ICU where Marlon was hospitalized, accompanying medical professionals, psychologists, and social workers in what is commonly referred to as the delivering of bad news, accompanying social services to the demands and extended needs, and carrying out conversations with family members, especially the father (Jorge) in the corridors of the HPS.

The HPS has two ICUs: Dulce (aunt) was in one of them, in a coma after being shot in the head, and Marlon (25 years old), David's older brother (17 years old), was in another. As mentioned before, both of them (David's aunt and older brother) were shot with more than 10 bullets in front of the house, when they used their own bodies as a shield to avoid David's execution, who worked for a criminal faction as a “scout” for drug trafficking.

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<sup>4</sup> Society seeks to discipline individuals said to avoid socializing, and, with this purpose, total institutions emerged. According to Goffman (2001), they are characterized by being enclosed institutions that operate under a confinement regime, where a relatively large group of interns live full time, and, on the other hand, a management team that oversees the life in the institution. Trauma hospitals are not usually in the total institutions category, but the intertwining of health and security produces this inflection.

In the ICU of the HPS, where Marlon's family was taken care of, 30-minute daily visits for family members took place at 11:30 am. Specialists came by as consultants, nutrition, psychology, and physical therapy residents, among others. And permanently, there were the intensivists on duty, medical residents, nurses, nurse technicians. Prior to visiting hours, it was necessary that professionals talked about pleasantries, a few jokes, and what would be served at lunch because the atmosphere would be heavy with family members coming through the corridor. *In line* they would start washing their hands, disinfect them with alcohol, put on their apron and gloves. Head down, silent.

Marlon and David's father, stepmother, and Marlon's 7-months pregnant wife didn't know how to divide themselves between hospital visits. David was hiding in a neighborhood in Porto Alegre, living in a house where he was taking care of a baby, a drug dealer's son from the faction he was involved with. Dad went to visit Marlon every day, filled with tubes and sheets, monitors and his eyes covered with gauze. He was usually seen slowly running his fingers through his son's hair, while Marlon's 7-months pregnant wife caressed his feet, the parts of his body left without tubes and machinery.

Initially, the HPS social workers were distressed by the narratives surrounding Marlon, which positioned him as a subject involved in drug trafficking. They claimed that spreading stories of criminalization of certain health users was difficult because it affected the institution as a whole. Their strategies to translate and re-signify the family reports, known to them while accompanying Marlon's father, stepmother and wife, took place in the institutional space named *Case Discussion Meeting*.

At the HPS, there were two monthly case discussion spaces as part of the institutional culture: one was the *Death Meeting* and the other was the *Case Discussion Meeting*. The *Death Meeting* was the only regular monthly space in which medical residents and multi-professional residents met to discuss a "case" that was "unsuccessful", restricted only to medical residents who chose the cases to be discussed; the multi-professional residents would only learn on that day which patient had been chosen by them and no active participation with other knowledge groups<sup>5</sup> was encouraged.

The other institutional space, named *Case Discussion Meeting*, was composed of multi-professional residents. The resident social worker and psychologist, Marlon's family care references, presented some analysis in the *Case Discussion Meeting*, underlining that their professional actions did not work in the "so Cartesian"<sup>6</sup> way, of strict biological concerns. In presenting the family's situation, they pointed out that, initially, many fantasies about Marlon were created such as the fact that "he was a criminal", and stories about David having had a hidden romance with the drug dealer, being the execution attempt due to the teenager revealing a photo of the two on social media. (Santos, 2019, p.73).

Furthermore, the social worker exposes the risky pregnancy of Marlon's wife and the stepmother, Jorge's partner (Marlon and David's father). Marlon's wife had missed her prenatal appointments, as they had to move in a hurry to avoid being killed. And the family had no knowledge of David's whereabouts. In any case, the doctors were not there and the considerations and disaffection directed at them demonstrated the effects of the hierarchical measures between medical and other professions, mainly by the absence of information to health professionals and the family about the health-disease process of Marlon.

The body, in a trauma hospital context, is apparently understood as a biological mass disarticulated from its history, affecting on understandings of what it is to give support and care. However, one perceives the body immersed in a political field, where power relations invest it, mark it, direct it, lean on it, subject it to carry out tasks, and force it to perform ceremonies (Foucault, 1979). The body, taken as an object of medical

<sup>5</sup> Campos (2007) suggests the concepts of Field and Nucleus in health training. Nucleus would be the set of knowledge and responsibilities specific to each profession or specialty. Field would be the knowledge and responsibilities common or confluent to several professions or specialties.

<sup>6</sup> Cartesian logic starts from the mind-body dualism; the epistemology that separates the mind from the world. (Barbosa, 1995)

power-knowledge, places the family as the most constant agent of medicalization, assuming its central objective, which is the duty of each individual to his or her own health, and, at the same time, to the general health of the population. That is, the functioning of medicine is sustained in instances of social and moral control, such as the salvation of the sick (Fonseca, 2015).

The notion of family in the nuclear and biomedical perspective denies that the body of one is held as an event for the body of another. The relationship between individual and family varies according to contexts and the social category we are dealing with. Fonseca (2000), in his book *Família, Fofoca e Honra (Family, Gossip and Honor)* noticed that, in peripheral families, the boundaries of the body are blurred and transcend any individuality. There is a sense of family care that includes sacrificing your individual projects or those of your nuclear family to save troubled individuals in the extended family network.

This is what happens with Marlon's family. David's salvation by Marlon and Dulce: Power of Love. Power to cheat the death of another with the body-shield. The salvation of the hospital: Love for the power-knowledge of biomedicine; the shield. Symbolic shield of the technologies of the body and therefore impenetrable until violence enters the hospital doors and puts this power in check.

There are subjects and their families who escape such rationalities, of what it is to be able to receive care, what care is, and what it is to be a caregiver. We will use the concept of moral economy taken up by Fassin (2014, 2017, 2018), as it allows us to perceive the practices of health professionals intersected by culturally produced principles and choices, and to understand the hierarchies put into play, the values operated in the care assigned to patients' lives, as well as the principles of justice and humanity. The actions in public health comprise a moral dimension of action, which certain context defines it as the good of humanity, and cover up the diversity of the demand in a process of multiple reductions, such as the denial of social suffering by reducing life to its biological aspect.

Crime and criminalization cross Marlon and David's family, revealing that processes of medicalization and criminalization associate in multiple territorialities that exceed the body-hospital relationship and determine logics of power, reinforced in intersectional stigmas.(Santos; Nardi, 2021). Productions of truth concerning the subject associated with crime are based on what Michel Misse (2010) calls criminal subjection, as the social construction of crime and the power devices through which the supposed subjects that will compose a social type prone to commit a crime are preventively selected. These processes begin and end based of some kind of social accusation that can be made explicit to the subjects. It can also be veiled, unknown to the health care users themselves, as it usually is behind the scenes in trauma hospitals.

Marlon's status as a defendant was reiterated by the image of a father circulating as a body marked by the state, made clear by the use of the electronic anklet. Criminal subjection in this case is directly related to ancestry, poverty and race as markers that go back to Brazilian society and its colonial logic. (author). Thus, as Gonzaga& da Costa Junior (2020, p. 243) infer, "the allusion of the family figure, appears strongly an allusion to blood ties", as a force for state and political claim and intervention. However, this same allusion is also a factor that would explain the neglect preventing possible interventions to these situations by State institutions.(Medeiros, 2018).

The roots of this association transcend the time and space of the peripheries, and make the identity exchanges between workers and criminals borderline, as well as the transits between work and crime (Efreim Filho,2017; Farias, 2019), especially when studying the past of masculinities in the history of Brazilian public health (Santos, Nardi, 2018). When a new image of Marlon was recreated, especially after the social service and psychology professionals addressing in the various departments of the institution, other feedbacks were able to place him as a victim: Marlon would be a father of a family in a few months, he was a community leader, he was a worker, a hero who sacrificed his life for his younger brother.

Death management occurs through the systematic action of the State in an effective control over living bodies, confinement, and subjective domination, via forms and devices of race and biopower, through which physical and symbolic violence is perpetrated, mostly against the black Brazilian population. (Medeiros & Hattori, 2020)

Thus, it is up to certain subjects to prove their innocence, from the beginning to the end of time. Placing a person into the “victim” model means to frame life as more than merely a biological organism, it must have adequate conditions for survival, such as: housing, food, health (which includes basic sanitation), among other aspects. The absence of these elements demonstrates that “in the face of this complex and circular process, social and spatial hierarchies are created that are measured according to the ability to access symbolically and economically valued places”(Butler, 2018).

Certain inscriptions on the body can project the person into a social limbo between life and death. The pain of family members produces a sense of vindication of the loss of a subject that, between physical life and death, also struggles against social death. (Vianna, 2021). It is a process of making trauma a banality, this mixture between a body both victim and perpetrator of violence in which the tension experienced in the scene is kept *looping*, for a long period. The waiting room, part of the possible territorialities for support, reveals the naturalization of violence. Which goes beyond square meters and chairs. Physical space is a mediation of suspended time, of the way bodies can position themselves and coexist.

Some aspects denote how social inequality is forged both in the hierarchies of power-knowledge among health professionals and mainly directed toward family members who come from peripheral areas of the city (Govil, Acharya&Datta, 2022). These are absent aspects for the dimension of health care support to family members: the unavailability of spaces for family members to rest, of private and comfortable spaces for care, access to food, as well as spaces to encourage and welcome expressions of spirituality, as a key strategy used to understand the violence that abruptly crosses existences.

Compelling examples of the aforementioned aspects reveal themselves as when the HPS civilian police officer on police duty, which is next to the visitors’ entrance, listened to “all the crying, night and day” in the corridors (Santos, 2019, p.62). In cases of body recognition, before the body’s arrival at the Legal Medical Institute (IML) for expert examination, this recognition can be done at the Morgue of the HPS.

The *Morgue* was an unsanitary space. A very dark and damp enclosure of 16 square meters. There was a defrosted refrigerator that had previously been used to store remains and five metal stretchers, crammed almost on top of each other. Grim territory, that once inside one could perceive a stated differentiation of values between imminent death, which can lead to survival, compared to a lifeless body; dead both physically and socially. The nurse who introduced me to what death is like for him in the hospital exclaimed: “This place is horrible, horrible, it’s dehumanizing! One metal stretcher on top of the other. The body dumped with a sheet over it. This place smells like death. A family member comes here to recognize the body, what kind of space is that?” (Santos, 2019, p.63). Once death is ascertained, the patient “ceases to be a patient”. The “space” is a “non-place”<sup>7</sup>.

In these multiple institutional spaces, describing and analyzing such experiences is a way to explicit the apparent contradictions regarding the notion of modes of care, devoid of the recognition of the pain and loss of vulnerable populations in marginal territories. Moral valuations imply the conditions of what is communicated and how, as situations observable in the next subsection.

<sup>7</sup> It would be “place” when referred to some event, a myth, or a story. This pointing will make the space linked to a differential identification, becoming meaningful to the individual who refers to it or recognizes it as a space of occurrence of one of these events. Once enclosed in this particularity, that space will present a distinctiveness that will identify it as a “place” (Kniestedt, 2010).

## Hospitals as a potency for life or as maintenance of imminent death?

The following subsection situates what would be the process of “delivering bad news”, or rather, the outline of punctual interactions between medical staff and the father (Jorge), or even the continuous support for the family’s suffering when facing the son’s health-illness process. The effects of these interactions, reliving of the violence and trauma attached to the relationship between father and surviving son (David) will also be presented.

Young men are morally positioned in the trauma hospital as “trauma-worthy” (Author, 2019b). From being a subject involved with the crime of drug trafficking, Marlon became a life that mattered<sup>8</sup> and a challenge to the team of medical specialists and intensivists who stated, “I don’t know how he is still alive.” (Santos, 2019, p.71). The biomedical team was also not exempt from many dilemmas and suffering when it was daily summoned to the ICU to glimpse that the finitude of one ceases something in the life of another.

For two months, there were days of hope from the health care team, “The patient won’t die, he’s strong.” “Look at the size of his hands. A young Black guy, 25 years old and 1.90 cm tall. He didn’t fit on the stretcher.” “He doesn’t want to die until he can see his son being born.” On other days, it was just dismay: removal of a large part of the intestine, hemodialysis, amputation of an arm due to necrosis, and a leg that was to be amputated next. (Santos, 2019, p.71)

“My son must be dead”(Santos, 2019, p. 69), Jorge said upon arrival on a Monday, when the family had been asked to arrive an hour before visiting hours. Farewell and hope are a constant for the family and the health professionals’ team, and the temporalities narrated in this case study show that minutes in the hospital corridors turn into hours and weekends, waiting for news, in despair.

On that day, the psychology and social work residents who were accompanying the situation, the researcher, and the family waited in a circle of anguish and sadness in the middle of the hospital corridor, because the medical team had not informed them of what the news would be. What they did know was that Marlon’s worsening was after they belatedly discovered a large necrotic part of his intestine.

These reference professionals accompanied Jorge and Marlon’s stepmother, trying to make passage, a support for what might come. They went to the ICU staff room announcing their arrival. We could see through the glass of the ICU room, about four medical specialists surrounding Marlon’s bed. Fifteen minutes had passed since the agreed time with his father and stepmother, who were waiting anxiously outside the ICU. The father, as described by the social worker, “was drilling holes in the ground, walking back and forth.”(Santos, 2019, p.69)

Thirty minutes had passed: the health professionals, coming and going between the ICU staff room and the waiting room, were looking for Marlon’s bed, where the four medical specialists were still engrossed in low voice conversations, inaccessible to any outsider on the subject. The two residents already distressed, returned to the ICU exit where they found Jorge walking back and forth, “I just need to know what’s wrong with my son, if he’s alive.” The stepmother, Jorge’s companion, translated the scene, “He is starting to have to accept the death of his son, he spent the weekend feeling very bad.” (Santos, 2019, p.70)

Forty minutes had passed: the tension between the medical team and other professionals is pronounced. The nurse, head of duty, sitting in front of the computer looked at the two reference residents<sup>9</sup> and said, “it’s not up to me, if it were, we would already be talking to the parents.” The medical resident then gets up from her chair and speaks in a loud voice: “Hey, calm down! I needed to see what the doctors were going to pass on from their evaluation.”(Santos, 2019, p.70)

8 From the perspective of Judith Butler (2018) a certain group of people is seen as having precarious lives, legitimizing their deaths as something expected, making any bond in the sense of otherness impossible.

9 The reference team or reference professionals, according to Campos (2007) are health care professionals with the same object and objective in health, responsible for the subject and the community they serve, where the continuity in care is present.



Then, she walks out the ICU door. The psychologist and social worker residents followed the doctor, who, for about 5 minutes, explained to the father and stepmother what had happened to Marlon. “Everything that could go wrong has gone wrong with him. Everything single thing. The intestine is rotten, but the head is preserved.” (Santos, 2019, p.70). The resident physician later justified to the team that she wanted to use a language that they could understand. Telling them that the head was preserved was a way of saying that the son would be conscious for them to say goodbye.

However, for the family, the news was as desperate as their previous vagueness: “If you have to say he’s going to die, just say it, I can’t stand it anymore, they don’t explain anything right,” vented Marlon’s wife who arrived later and who withdrew upset from the conversation with the doctor, leaving the father and stepmother. (Santos, 2019, p.70).

This same resident doctor in other circumstances asked the father not to caress his son’s foot because “it was rotten, and it might fall off.” This professional said she was relieved that the moment would come when she would change teams: “I’m glad I’m leaving, it’s just problem after problem in this case, it’s hard. The day before switching teams, at the time of the visit, she drew a stick person, missing one arm and both legs. “How awful!” said one of the multi-professional residents. The intensivist gave a disapproving smile and silence reigned in the nursing team’s room, “Guys, it’s nervous laughter, this is the reality, this is how he’s going to be!” explains the resident physician. (Santos, 2019, p.71).

After successive invasive procedures, a new reference professional took over the contact with the family members. The resident doctor, different from the previous professional, had another posture. He asks me: “What does it mean to be alive? A beating, breathing heart, is that living?” The tone of his voice was melancholy as we stood at the corner of the corridor after the visit. “I wouldn’t let a child of mine get to that point.” (Santos, 2019, p.73)

As usual, I accompanied the support given by this resident doctor to the family. He approaches the father who is with the pregnant wife. He shakes hands with both, and so do I. While speaking, he looked only at the father. Perhaps it was the imposing position and leadership that the father had, and as the decision-making person, who managed the family’s relationship with the situation of violence experienced and who did not spend a day without going to visit his son. The professional calmly explained the boy’s intestine situation. The father seemed to begin to handle certain medical terms and understandings, he used expressions like “I’ve also noticed that the abdomen was distended”. He asked several questions and listened carefully to the health care provider who slowly warned him that no surgical measure was possible. (Santos, 2019, p.74)

The father seemed incredibly grateful for the conversation that lasted about 20 minutes. When he left, he asked the resident doctor what he thought of the conversation. He said it was good, it created a good bond with the father, that he needed to receive the information correctly. “There were many things that were not correctly explained to him.” (Santos, 2019, p.74)

After almost a month, Marlon and David’s father was already addressing me, and sharing some moments like, “Today I’m going to see how his tracheostomy is going to be.” I then took advantage of an occasion of when I was coming down the elevator with him to find out how he had felt about the support provided: “At first it was very bad, they didn’t explain things properly, but now I’ve started to understand the situation better, I’ve also started to accept that my son is leaving.” (Santos, 2019, p.75)

In another moment one of the intensivist doctors admitted: “if we wanted to, we could keep Marlon alive for another month on Noradrenaline alone<sup>10</sup>”. But how can one wish that a “half man” (the cardiologist’s words),

<sup>10</sup> In recent years, terms have been created to designate the different types of death: dysthanasia, for a slow dying process, with excessive bodily invasion and suffering; orthothanasia, for a peaceful death, with as little suffering as possible; and euthanasia, referring to a death decided by patients and doctors. However, the criteria for evaluating these end-of-life modalities were - and still are - exclusive to the medical apparatus (Menezes, 2006).

without two legs, without an arm, without part of his intestines, blind, having to undergo hemodialysis, would come back to life? It is in these distinct movements from the medical and multi-professional team that life and death acquire multiple meanings in health practices and influence the support for family members.

It is possible today to postpone, to prolong life, through technology, but little is questioned about the physical and emotional cost for the patient and his or her family, as well as for the professionals of such a procedure. The individual, as the subject of his life and the design of his death, is often silenced. Nowadays, Medicine has reached a level of technological development that allows a certain domination and regulation of death, in other words, a “domestication” of death (Menezes, 2006).

Often, professionals speak and act near the patient’s bedside as if the patient is no longer alive, referring to the patient in the past tense. While Marlon’s grandmother and wife stroked his head, the health professionals in the staff room discussed whether his two legs would be partially or completely amputated.

By symbolically chopping Marlon’s decomposing body, one annihilates the language of the victims, leading to their social disappearance and the recognition of loss and pain (Araújo, 2012, p. 225). There is an inversion of priorities in the contemporary political and moral field, in “which the right to life would become more important than social and economic rights and would even impose itself to the detriment of these” (Fassin, 2014, p. 193).

The use of technical jargon or the adoption of childish language, which does not allow a full understanding by the patient and/or family members. How this information is passed on may reveal the effects of a racist and classist society that endures in public institutions (Ventura & Yujra, 2019). Racism is reflected on physical and genital exacerbation, intellectual incompleteness, as a characteristic associated with the black population (Conrado & Ribeiro, 2017). In Brazil, race and class are categories intertwined with the prevailing social imaginary. To think of poverty is to assume a black person, while to think of a black person is to link them to the condition of material poverty and, also, intellectual poverty (Gonzaga & da Costa Junior, 2020).

Through the specialized gaze of intangible wisdom, mystical thoughts and spirituality fundamentally intersects the grieving process. During many of these observations, I was able to observe the father and grandmother passing their hands, with some distance, on Marlon, as if they were giving him “a pass”. Health professionals, including medical professionals, wondered what his religion was. The resident doctor, who was the first reference to support Marlon’s family, believed that they belonged to the Umbanda religion, others assumed they were Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the doctor from one of the specialties inferred, when observing the family in their farewell rituals, that they were syncretic, a mixture of several.

Spirituality, in this context, has been recognized as a means of alleviating the suffering of the health care user. Marlon’s father, in an elevator conversation with me, told me that he believed in the *Kardecist* spiritualism and said that religion helped him both in “leaving crime” and in accepting his son’s health condition.

Distinct decision-making processes (which are carried out all the time, by multiple social actors involved) involved humanized care in many moments, such as in the family’s farewell process to Marlon. The on-call physician allowed the family to spend 24 hours saying goodbye to Marlon. This doctor said that the women in the family cried a lot, touched the body a lot. For him the farewell is a fundamental process that commonly involves actions such as “undressing the relative to see if the body has been well taken care of.

Foucault (1979, p.97) addresses popular religious rites as a kind of diffuse resistance to the authoritarian medicalization of their bodies and diseases. And he warns us, “*instead of seeing in these religious practices a residual phenomenon of archaic beliefs not yet disappeared, are they not a current form of political struggle against authoritarian medicalization, medical control?*” Rather a fight for the right to mourn.

Death and grief are social and political phenomena. Which for people already in mourning presents the fear of a new grief to be experienced, aggravating the situation, (Neto & Lisboa, 2017), when grief becomes a stable condition of lives that experience impending physical death as one of the effects of social death.

The persistence of grief in families of precarious territories frustrates the social expectation that the family members' lives will be "resumed" after a legitimate period of suspension of daily activities. Thus, grief cannot be defined as a transitory and intermediate situation that marks the "passage" of statuses of those who are gone and those who remain: alive/dead, married/widowed, child/adult. (Lacerda, 2014).

Butler, earlier, has proposed reflecting on which lives are "grievable", with "*the subject's action based on his/her offended status produces a basis for legitimizing and delegitimizing her own violent actions.*" (Butler, 2018, p. 251). The author titles her book "*Frames of War: When is life grievable?*" in order to rethink the complex and fragile character of social bonds, especially to consider what conditions can make violence less possible, as certain ethical frameworks recognize between killable lives/ lives that matter.

Marlon's family, like so many, "survive in adversity," as emphasized by Efrem Filho(2017). They live off their work, in the folds of the legal and illegal, move between risks, need to adequately respond to different spheres of values, and live with the imminent possibility of confrontation and death. Among work, religion and crime, such distinctions are materialized in overlapping territorial disputes that coexist in the subjective territories of families that are indistinctly associated with crime and violence by society (Gonzaga& da Costa, 2020).

In this way, a last and not least important aspect concerns David's search for information about his aunt and older brother, which allows us to problematize the revivals of trauma and impending social death that escapes the gaze of health institutions.

The teenager was impeded from any access to his family. The father had already threatened the social worker saying "it would get bad for her" if they allowed him to visit. She calmly explained that visits could only be prevented in the hospital with a court order, but the only person able to do that was the grandmother, as she had custody. (Santos, 2019, p.81). In any case, the Guardianship Council had stated that there was no sign of where David lived and knew that approaching the family would be somewhat impossible since they lived very close to where the aunt and brother were shot.

However, there was one day when social workers received a call from the hospital gate, "David is coming up here." (Santos, 2019, p.81). No person under the age of 18 was allowed to enter the HPS without an escort, however, guards at the reception desk were touched by the teenager's crying and clamoring for answers about his family. From then on, the social service team began to worry about a referral that would ensure David's social protection.

The psychologist and social worker welcomed the teenager into a small enclosure, "I've heard that my aunt has passed away, I need to know if it's true." Due to issues concerning hospital rules, the residents could not provide information to an adolescent, and so, they contacted their preceptors for an endorsement to enable them to reveal the information, "Can we tell him that his aunt has passed away?" Both preceptors denied the request. The two resident professionals (in psychology and social work) then looked at each other as if they were at a dead end. This time, they would not suffer for not having information about the health user, they would carry the burden of not being able to deliver what is most important to the subject.

"How are you doing?" asks the resident psychologist. David then tells of how he feels. With emotion, with eloquence. It is easy to understand him, but difficult to connect the young man standing before us with the heavy story he carried. For the well-articulated words, for the vanity that shines through. He talks about helplessness. About the mother who abandoned him in his childhood, of the estrangement from his father and the family that refuses to see him. He says, "what happened is not my fault, because my father never took care of me," and cries when the psychologist asks, "Do you feel that your father loves you?" (Santos, 2019, p.84)

David said he would forward his emancipation before turning 18. He was in limbo. His term of custody was neither under the power of the state, nor with the grandmother with whom he had always lived. He said that, when he decided to leave home, she went to the court to declare that she no longer wanted to be responsible

for him. David justifies his grandmother's action: "Because you know how teenagers are, rebellious. He says that he was at a friend's house and that he was paid to take care of her baby. (Santos, 2019, p.84)

The health professionals, after hearing the young man's story, begrudgingly passed on the preceptors' decision: that they could not pass along information about whether the aunt was alive or dead without a guardian over the age of 18 present. One of the health professionals asked him to try calling his stepmother at that moment, hoping that she would pick up and tell him what had happened. He picks up his cell phone and dials, and according to him, there's no answer. Seconds of silence and a look between them manifested their suffering, this time for knowing and being unable to speak.

After saying goodbye to David, one of the professionals vented to me: "what if he learns that his aunt passed away out there, how will he react? I would rather he got the news from us, we could offer him support in the best possible way. This is so hard." "I also think he wants to avoid talking to me because we didn't tell him his aunt passed away. We broke a bond of trust that could have been." (Santos, 2019, p.85)

Kinship memories and how they are mixed with other politics of memory, such as those involving diverse events and temporalities (Carsten, 2008), are relived in a situation of multiple losses and violence. However, the hospital institution, centered in health care in the biological scope, has in its rationality the "make survive"<sup>11</sup>, exempting itself from the responsibility of strategies for the well-living of health users and their families. Health prevention, including violence prevention and referral to the intersectoral network is perceived as part of primary health care actions. However, for many men, as it may have been for David, the hospital may be the last (sometimes the only one) stronghold of social protection and health care. The hospital can covenant the policy of doing nothing, sustaining the maintenance of imminent (social) death.

Kinship, torture and loneliness are intersected in several studies on families who lack the right to grieve (EfremFilho, 2017; Farias, 2019; Medeiros, 2018; Lacerda, 2014). It is common practice that families from precarious territorialities are perceived as impulsive and violent subjects who should be kept at a certain distance. The trauma hospital's rationality with families who have survived armed conflicts has made invisible a trauma dynamic that includes the blaming of what happened on other family members/friends, as we will see in the father's relationship with his son David.

Aspects regarding post-traumatic stress such as flashbacks (successive intense memories of the scene) occur with greater intensity in attempted homicide (Affleck, Carmichael, Whitley, 2018, p. 03). Marlon's family in the home-hospital space constantly experienced insecurity, since they continued to inhabit the same residence where the dealers had fired the shots.

The relationship developed between State and society, in general, and the black Brazilian population and its territories cannot be seen in isolation. It is in the subjective relationship between the various sectors, institutions, classes and social groups, that the distinctive ways of fostering the material and symbolic exclusion of a given group, as well as the non-recognition of its identity as an integral part of a nation project, are expressed (Gonzaga & da Costa, 2020).

Examples of this displacement or inversion of priorities in the field of the political are well illustrated by the impending (social) death of Marlon's brother as part of an understated object compared to the technologies and interventions that sometimes escape the very organic boundaries between living and dying. The favela (Brazilian slums), is "a space of exception: it is a piece of territory that is placed outside the normal legal order [...] that which is excluded from it, and, according to the etymological meaning of the term exception,

<sup>11</sup> The unprecedented absolutization of biopower is combined with the generalization of sovereign power, and biopolitics necessarily merges with thanatopolitics. In light of this, Agamben proposes a third formula that would grasp the specificity of 20th century biopolitics: "no longer to make die or to make live, but to make survive (Agamben, 2003: 108). Neither life nor death, but only the production of survival.

captured outside, included by its own exclusion” (Agamben, 2003, p. 165), since the state of exception has become the rule for this population. Its residents are indistinctly associated with crime and violence by society (Gonzaga & da Costa, 2020).

The social determination of death, correlative to the unequal distribution of life, overlaps with the denial of loss of many early annihilated lives. One’s death does not end there. It takes the father, and the pregnant wife back to a territory in which they do not know if they are safe from the threats of the drug faction that has already slaughtered two of the family. With them, they take part of their existences, no longer the same, leaving the hope that died inside the hospital and David’s life, in the unpredictability of fate outside the health institution.

## Final considerations

The objective of this study was to understand families as co-victims and survivors of emergency situations related to gun violence, as well as ways to operationalize a qualified care for family members and/or close friends, an aspect still invisible in various professional practices. Delivering bad news should not be an indiscriminate part of every health care process for survivors of violence, especially from armed conflicts. Thus, several aspects were addressed around the narratives of life and death of Marlon’s family.

However, the narratives brought to us launch us to future possibilities regarding the power of the hospital as part of the public network service that echoes the life of subjects that are often unaware of or forbidden to circulate through the decentralized services of their territories (such as those of Primary Health Care). But to do so, the hospital must overcome the notion of “fatality” and “inevitability” that surrounds the common sense view of the problem (Deslandes, 2001).

The care process of a family of health care users is an effect of some aspects mentioned above: the social inequality performed in the hierarchical power relations among health care professionals and between professionals and family members. Obviously, we can see the disinvestment in the trauma hospital, perceived in the logic of shifts and lack of replacement of health professionals (some medical specialties are outsourced and effective nurse technicians are insufficient compared to the workload), as well as the total absence of an adequate space to receive waiting visitors.

It is emphasized that the term applied in the thesis “corridor suffering” corresponds to loneliness, silencing, lack of welcoming spaces that ergonomically *spits* the family out of its circuit through an inaccessible language. Delivering news means listening and making possible a family’s outline of the illness process that is as harmless as possible. Some knowledge holders, articulated among themselves, manage to move outside the confines of the hospital, but nobody will want to go beyond its walls if they are not aware of the importance of looking at the subject as a person carrying history.

Finally, we emphasize the need for a comprehensive look at these families and for the development of strategies capable of supporting them considering their multiple demands. It is also important to prioritize the training of the professionals who directly or indirectly deal with these families in their work institutions. The research findings indicate the need for an interdisciplinary attention focused on this group, considering their health, social, financial, and legal demands.

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# The Hypothesis of the Misencounter

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## Abstract

This article develops the following hypothesis: despite their differences, or better, precisely because of them, law and politics in Brazil comprise a system whose primary feature is its incapacity to form a totalization of the social world; that is, to formulate a public rule capable of including the diverse parts of society. Much the opposite: the characteristic of this system is the purposeful rupture, the strategic estrangement between the pole formed by law and the State (which is constructed against spontaneous forms of sociability) and the pole that includes politics and society (in which exchange modelled on the gift plays a central role). There is no higher plane capable of incorporating the two into a single unity, nor do they submit to a synthesis or to an encompassing value. The article argues that the relationship between law and politics is articulated as a dialogue conducted at a distance and through estrangement, such that one is constituted as the possible worlds of the other.

**Keywords:** The Brazilian dilemma, totalization of the social, gift, bargain, the state against society, disinterest as moral obligation.

# A hipótese do desencontro

## Resumo

O artigo procura perceber a relação entre a política congressal brasileira e o direito a partir da ideia de sistema (um é o outro do outro e somente assim ganha sentido). Todavia, a etnografia mostra que a política e o direito formam sistemas que não apenas não tem uma homologia estrutural, mas se constituem a partir do seu distanciamento e estranhamento recíprocos: o que caracteriza sua relação é o desencontro e não a reflexão em planos distintos da experiência social de um conjunto de valores e categorias elementares. Em outras palavras, não há uma síntese num plano superior, tampouco um valor englobante que pudesse integrá-los em uma totalidade que se realizaria no plano do imaginário. A alternativa é tomar a distância e o estranhamento como o fenômeno primeiro e retirar daí as consequências possíveis.

**Palavras-chave:** dilema Brasileiro, totalização do social, dádiva, barganha, o Estado contra a sociedade, desinteresse como uma obrigação moral.

# The Hypothesis of the Misencounter

Luiz E. Abreu

This article develops the following hypothesis: despite their differences, or better, precisely because of them, law and politics in Brazil comprise a system whose primary feature is its incapacity to form a totalization of the social world, that is, to formulate a public rule capable of including the diverse parts of society (the thesis advanced by Aragão, 2018: 112, which I adapt here to the relationship between the judiciary and the executive). This hypothesis is the outcome of a lengthy research trajectory that began in 1988 with the study of the politics of a small town in the hinterland of Bahia state, northeastern Brazil. From 1994, this research was transferred to politics in the country's National Congress and from 2002 onwards it turned to the study of law (for example, Abreu 2006a, 2013b). The questions have gradually accumulated over the years, some already known through the literature, but I ask the reader to allow me to spell out the most relevant for the reflection in this article in my own somewhat impressionistic way.

Like other social scientists of my generation, I went to the field imbued with the 'enlightened gaze' of the theoretical models of someone who saw politics from the viewpoint of middle-class social experience in metropolises like Rio, São Paulo and Brasília. However, my 'enlightened gaze' was incompatible with the experience of politics in the Bahian hinterland (an assertion that, I believe, still contains an element of truth). While, seen from the viewpoint of these state capitals, the politics of the Brazilian interior appeared to be the result of alienation and the domination of a backward and clientelist political elite, viewed from close up this politics was organically related to the local social reality; in other words, it reproduced spontaneous forms of sociability and was viscerally integrated into local culture. Furthermore, it did not simply present a rational reflection; it was also perfectly aware of the objective limits of its context and possessed an acute perception of social reality – to the point that I sometimes wondered whether it was not those of us living in the metropolis who were alienated. For the regional population, the exchange relations that adhered to the model of the gift – and about which so much had been said as, supposedly, one of Brazil's great afflictions – signified the agency not just of those who belonging to the local political elite but equally of those who had very little in material terms but who, nonetheless, were aware of their own capacity for action through exchange relations and thus their own relevance as agents. The juridical norm that we find not only in legal codes but also in its popular representation was something for other people: not only was it foreign and sometimes contradictory to local practices, it was also alien to the sense of community in the town where I conducted my research. Law (*lei*, the word they used instead of *norma*, norm) meant the 'command' of those in power. This meant the establishment of a moral order in which "everyone stopped thinking about their own interests and began to help others." Indeed, the idea of community was contrary and opposed to the idea of individual interest, to the point that self-interest was declared incompatible with good political practice: there, people always acted for others rather than for themselves – in discourse, obviously. Citizenship did not mean the rights and obligations (more the former than the latter) that we find in the classics of political thought (Marshall, 1992), which are the outcome of the conflicts and struggles for interests, crystallized in rights that individuals assert against power. Instead, the good citizen obeyed the law in the sense of the aforementioned moral order (Abreu, 1993).

In National Congress I did not come across any articulated system in which relations between ideas and values were systematically presented that could rival the coherence and articulation of the system I encountered in Corte de Pedra (the name of the small town). What I found was the overlapping of regional and ideological values was not subsumed within a dense and articulated justification in which everyone fitted. This functioned in parallel to an institutional discourse in which compliance with legal norms and the disinterest of

politicians prevailed as values. The discourse seemed to spin around in a vacuum: the narratives made no explicit reference to the universe of substantive differences and the interests at stake, but said either the same things or very similar things in a context of conflict, as though the discourse were no more than a studious theatre in which what people said was constrained by the requirements of an imagination incompatible with practice. In effect, the public discourse contrasted vividly with practice 'behind the scenes' (in the *bastidores*; the term is native) where the narratives travelled in the opposite direction. In these discourses, political practice did not envisage the legal norm as something that establishes and gives meaning but as something that limits – very often inappropriately – wishes and actions. Moreover, the ideal place of the norm was that of a detail resolved after politics has followed its course and, in the clash of forces, one had emerged victorious. Aragão's words capture the paradox well. In the National Congress – he wrote – “alliances are made and unmade at the whim of ‘casuists’” and express “specific contextualizations of a broader and more generalized trend — which can be noted in all formal groups in Brazil” that reveal a “‘non-binding and reversible’ ideological positioning,” reflecting “a circumstantial practice rather than an ideological, formal and categorical elaboration.” In Brazil, he writes, “the categorical appears to be precisely what is produced in the process and not what ontologically generates, guides and regulates” (Aragão, 2018: 267). Behind the scenes, the discourse on practice was also opposed to public narratives: there, some actors thought and acted on the basis of the ontological recognition that the other is a being-with-interests. Paradoxically, however, the politicians perceive politics as exchange relations that adhere to the model of the gift (involving favours bestowed in an apparently disinterested manner). Put otherwise, although self-interest was imagined to motivate the other's action, any agreement based on its explicit expression (as the exchange of support for money, for example) was considered to be a degradation of politics (Abreu, 1999).

Research on law, for its part, primarily revealed the resistance that its 'operators' (the term is their own) had to dialoguing with anyone who was not also a law graduate. However, this was merely the reflection in the researcher's experience of a much more general attitude. For them, the distance and estrangement of everyone else was a value that performed a double function: on one hand, it assured the purity of the law and, on the other, it aimed to subordinate society: the operators repeated unequivocally and in the most diverse contexts that law made society possible: “without law there is no society,” they would assert. From this perspective, law was not born from Brazilian society, it was foreign to it: not the expression, in an artificial language, of what is most essential to a particular local tradition, but an outside tradition that claimed to be an heir in perfect continuity with the history of the west (beginning with the Hamurabi code, passing through the Greek polis and identifying itself, principally, with Roman law). In the encounter with society, law was degraded either because society influenced it in some way, or because what was encountered in social reality was not the prevalence of the norm as something that establishes the limits within which someone's action unfolds, but rather its quotidian and sometimes obligatory violation, its bastardized application. Various times I heard variants of the following expression: “Brazil's problem is not the law. Our laws are excellent. The problem is that people don't comply with them.” If any outside influence degrades, the most devastating was the influence of politics (a central topic in how the higher courts were perceived, especially the Federal Supreme Court, and the unanswered question that expressed this perception: “is the FSC a legal court or a political one?”). All of this suggested the following aporia for anyone looking at the law from outside: on one hand, Brazilian law (in its hegemonic schools of thought) is understood in opposition to the society to which it belongs; on the other, it only makes sense as part of this same society and in relation to it (Abreu, 2016).

The misencounter is an ethnographic fact that comes to the fore of this research experience: the mutual incomprehension between the small town and the metropolis; the legal norm as something originating from outside and that does not represent us; the politics that in a mass society like Brazil's is the instrument used to accommodate conflicting interests and that requires the negation of self-interest in order to build alliances;

a law that disdains the society to which it belongs; a State that is constituted in the language of law and constructed against spontaneous forms of sociability; politics and law as polar opposites. When I asked a lawyer who worked with the doyens of the PMDB how he would summarize the relationship between law and politics, based on his experience, the response was immediate: “who bosses whom.” The characteristic of this system is the purposeful rupture, the strategic estrangement between the pole formed by law and the State and the pole that includes politics and society. There is no higher plane capable of incorporating the two into a single unity. Put otherwise, the relationship between law and politics does not submit to a synthesis or to an encompassing value. I wish to suggest, therefore, that the relationship between them can be perceived as a dialogue conducted at a distance and through estrangement, such that one is constituted as the possible worlds of the other (an idea I take from Ricoeur, 1986).

Before advancing further, I should emphasize that the present study connects with a long tradition of research in anthropology, the best-known examples of which can be found in the works of Roberto Da Matta, Luís Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira and Roberto Kant de Lima. To these names I would add Luiz Tarlei de Aragão, whose works either remain unpublished or were previously difficult to access and have only recently been collected into a single volume. There exist, therefore, similarities – a certain ‘family resemblance’ – between what I call a misencounter and the opposition between the personal and individualist ethics and their corollaries that we find in Da Matta (1997), “the congenital separation between ownership (authority, law) and possession (immanence, practice)” in Aragão (2018: 112), the opposition between inquisitorial and accusatorial traditions and the particularities in the comprehension and application of Brazil’s juridical institutions described by Kant de Lima (1991, 1995), and the opposition between the conceptions of equality and the formulations concerning the public sphere developed by Cardoso de Oliveira (2013, 2011).

The article divides into two parts: the first examines the viewpoint of politics constructed against what, from the diffuse perspective of our Brazilian sociability, erodes relationships and makes good society impossible: self-interest and the market; the second, the viewpoint of law, structured around the idea that the State is constructed against society – that is, against the spontaneous forms of sociability for which exchange based on the model of the gift (even when used cynically and free of its obligations) plays a core role.

### **The bargain and the gift**

As I remarked above, politics in the National Congress manifested as a paradox in my observations (Abreu 1996, 1999, 2006a). Allow me to recall this point through an ethnographic vignette. At the time of the election of Severino Cavalcanti (PP) to the presidency of the Chamber of Deputies (in February 2005, still in the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, PT), one of my interlocutors told me two stories in the few minutes in which we were able to chat amid the tumult of the day. The first story was that one of the operators of what would later become known as the *mensalão* (the ‘big monthly payment’) visited parliamentarians with ‘bags of money’ (whether the expression was figurative or literal, I have no idea) to persuade them to vote for the government candidate for the presidency. “The chamber is amenable to this argument,” he told me. It is worth recalling that the denunciations made by Roberto Jefferson that set off the *mensalão* scandal would be published that same year, in June 2005, in an interview with the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper (Abreu 2006b) – and also that the government candidate for the presidency of the Chamber of Deputies (Luiz Eduardo Greenhalgh, PT) lost the election. The second story was that “some parliamentarians voted because the other one brought them milk fudge,” he added. The passage offers a pungent formulation of the contradiction: is our politics fated to alternate between venality (reality) and banality (delirium)? Allow me to reformulate the dilemma in a less dramatic but sociologically more appropriate fashion. The ethnographic data point to a tension

operating within political practice: on one hand, parliamentarians understood eminently political interactions as exchange relations based on the model of the gift – that is, as favours made in an apparently ‘disinterested’ manner, even when this was no more than a socially constructed lie, although these favours did entail the obligation to retribute in kind (Mauss, 1968: 147); on the other hand, it was perceptible that everyone (politicians, journalists, aides and so on) interpreted the actions of others and related to each other as beings-with-interests. This tension was reflected in two distinct models of exchange: one based on the gift, which demands a temporal distance between prestation and counter-prestation, the other on the market, which, by contrast, demands no such interval: on one side, favours and debts imposed by the obligation to retribute; on the other, votes for other things that take place immediately. Or, taking these two models to their extreme: milky fudge and bags of money.

One possible solution to integrate the opposition between these two models of exchange is to examine it through the idea of a moral order that I encountered in the Bahian hinterland, particularly the relationship between the gift (as the legitimate form of a political relation) and the obligation for politicians to be disinterested (to act on behalf of others). The centrality of the gift in the politics of Corte de Pedra was expressed in the following contradiction: on one hand, the recognition that society is fundamentally a collective undertaking in which people *should* be more than instruments of another’s interest; on the other, the inescapable fact that, since we live in this world, individuals (or partial groups within the whole) have their own interests, agendas and choices and the purpose of politics is precisely to accommodate them. This contradiction, in turn, showed our incapacity as a society to symbolically reconcile the two aspects so that they could be seen not as incompatible but as complementary: self-interests can be perceived as compatible with the whole in so far as they represent the internal possibilities derived from it. Looking at Congress from the idea of a moral order is – I repeat – ‘one possible solution.’ In making this observation, I wish to emphasize that other research trajectories could suggest other hypotheses and that the idea of a moral order does not apply to all possible ways of looking at Brazilian politics. Despite its limitations, the hypothesis has the advantage of going beyond the plane of the phenomenon as the more or less informed collection of aspects previously left out or mentioned only tangentially, curiosities of a traditionalism slowly disintegrating, and showing their structuring potential.

*Disinterest as amoral obligation* is also present in the ethnographic data on Brazil’s National Congress. It suffices to hear parliamentarians speak about themselves to an audience perceived as public. It is highly likely that their discourse employs tropes commonplace in this environment: they will say that they became a politician because of some force beyond them, a force imbued with the air of the sacred. Hence, they felt compelled to put themselves forward as a candidate, either persuaded by others or to defend some cause beyond themselves, or because they have a vocation to help the other. In all cases, the decision was taken in detriment to their own well-being or at the cost of great personal hardship. Disinterest as an obligation is also expressed on other planes registered by the literature. Schwartzman, for instance, already pointed out that the “notion that political groups should represent interests tends to be seen as improper by the Brazilian elite”; on the contrary, there prevails “the idea that parties and politicians should place themselves ‘above self-interests.’” Put otherwise, these should “always focus on the objectives of the nation as a whole” (Schwartzman, 1975: 15). Earlier still, Leff had been even more emphatic: “Brazilian political culture,” he said, “believes only in politics in the name of a ‘general interest’ of the nation considered as a whole” (Leff, 1968: 112). The value of disinterest is so central to how elected politicians justify themselves that it was explicitly extolled in the Code of Ethics of the Chamber of Deputies. The code stipulates that the parliamentarian has the duty to “examine all the proposals submitted for their consideration and vote on the basis of the public interest” (Article 3, item IV, drafted in 2002, Chamber of Deputies, 2011). In sum, at the centre of these phenomena – seen as a moral order or, at least, as its possibility – is disinterest as a duty, the requirement for the politician to leave aside his or

her being in the world (as, by definition, a subject with interests) in order to transform into a being-for-others, a transcription that, on another plane, is conceived as the result of a sacrifice: incorporating this being-for-others implies sacrificing one's own being-in-the-world.

All of this is reflected in words and in their use. In an environment in which everyone pays close attention to other people's words (and sometimes report them to someone else), making certain affirmations is dangerous: they may be perceived as violations, attacks or betrayals. Saying that someone else is acting on the basis of their own interests, in certain circumstances, is out of the question. Consequently, when words may be recorded or the interlocutor is distrusted (sometimes for good reason), the parliamentary aides usually deny that 'their' parliamentarians have any self-interests: they act on behalf of others or for what is beyond the immediate or the imminent. Aides may even highlight some interest but first ask for the audio recording to be switched off, as though they had some secret that would be dangerous to speak out loud (Bezerra, 1999). This, of course, is also a mechanism of socialization and manipulation: telling a secret (even one obvious to everyone) is a prestation that may later require a counter-prestation. It creates the possibility of acting on another in the future (an irrelevant consideration if the interlocutor is a researcher, but not if he or she is a journalist). When someone speaks of the other's self-interest (and people do so the whole time), generally they are making – in appearance, at least – an analysis of the political conjuncture; in this instance, what gives meaning to the other's action is the interest that motivates them, which can be inferred and revealed from what is not said, as such, but in some way expressed. But this is done by word of mouth and has various uses: to persuade someone else, suggest an alliance, spread a rumour and so on.

By contrast, the gift is not enunciated. But whenever I said that 'politics is exchange,' my interlocutors would immediately agree, as though I had said something that the person also knew but either had been unable to put into words or had forgotten. Sometimes, however, the gift – or more precisely the idea of a 'favour' – did find its way into the discourse of the agents. Reciprocity is used as a form of persuasion behind the scenes: "let me owe you this favour," people say, when other arguments are insufficient. The gift was also employed as a public argument to defend politicians accused of corruption in the legal sense. One minister, accused of earning money from the transfer of funds to municipalities, argued that "I did that as a favour for so-and-so because he told me it would be important for his municipality" or "I only did so because he argued that there were no interests on his part; he was doing it for the municipality" (Abreu, 1996). In another case, a deputy accused of participating in a schema on the Chamber Budget Committee declared: "I challenge anyone to say I went to their cabinet to ask for a personal favour," implying that any favours done were for others.<sup>1</sup> The last two examples were taken from formal occasions in which politicians were accused of misdeeds in which the gift (or more precisely disinterest) served as a category of defence. Both cases emphasize the different aspects of the gift: in the first, the point is to remind the interlocutor that the person who asks for something assumes a debt; the second enunciates disinterest as what motivates political action.

Why is the gift shrouded in silence but not self-interest? The more immediate answer is that, for a certain way of seeing politics, the gift should not be present in political institutions. Speaking out loud about the gift is to highlight something that should not be there, which has not been contained where it rightly belongs (private relations). From this perspective, mentioning it makes sense only as a criticism or condemnation. I think this answer is true in part but my hypothesis is that there are two other reasons that are not so obvious. The first can be exemplified by the role that the gift has in our sociability in a wider sense (DaMatta, 1997; Cardoso de Oliveira, 2004). In ordinary life, we – Brazilians – utilize the gift without turning it into an object of reflection. In these everyday contexts, the reason that the gift is not mentioned is not because it should not be there, since there is nothing wrong, we think, in maintaining cordial relations with neighbours, visiting friends, being

<sup>1</sup> Testimony to the Budget Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry, 3 November 1993 OF. SGM/P – 116/94, Tome II: 152, quoted in Teixeira, 1998: 60.



kind to the woman on the supermarket checkout, establishing relations with others. These and other attitudes are imagined by us as prestations and counter-prestations, free and obligatory simultaneously. It is as though the gift organized in our sociability a common substrate through which actions make sense and constitute, in many contexts, the basis of a good education and a morally correct attitude. Although there are certainly important differences between the more mundane domain of sociability and that of congressional politics, in both, I suggest, the gift serves to establish relations between apparently unconnected phenomena and gives them meaning. Hence, it has a grammatical nature. The rules of this grammar are not enunciated, however: they belong to that category of phenomena that are so evident they simply do not need to be mentioned. But again such an explanation is only partial. The second reason for the silence about the gift is the ontological character that it assumes. In Brazil, the being-for-politics is the being-for-exchange in its most fundamental sense: the experience of walking together in the same direction, gathering companions, implies being able to acquire commitments and assume debts whose guarantor is the person of the politician — as a self-contained totality. In politics, moreover, the alliance between some is always realized against others: the need for companions is the result of the inevitability of adversaries. In other words, the gift and conflict are indissociable: the meaning of one resides in its opposition, polarity and complementarity to the other. The politician as a being-for-exchange results from the need for alliance in the face of the inevitability of conflict. The second reason for the silence is somewhat similar to the first then: as an ontological condition, the gift is so obvious that it makes no sense to mention its existence, since speaking about it signifies distancing oneself, establishing a rupture with politics as a way of life (something that is perhaps fitting for the anthropologist but not the politician).

In the case of the Brazilian parliament, the gift as an unmediated foundational experience is consolidated in a double function: as the interpretation of the other in relation to the self and, simultaneously, as a project imposed by the self on the other. Or put another way, as a language and a possibility of action. In parliamentary politics, something only moves forward with the support of others. In this context, the other is someone needed by the self to achieve something but also someone who limits the self's desire: asking another for something gives this other the right to ask for a counter-prestation. In other words, achieving something requires committing oneself to the future desire of the other as the future limit of one's own actions (the self's possibilities for action are limited by the debts acquired to reach the present point). Hence the other is someone with whom I need to exchange but also someone with whom I have the least interest in exchanging. Politics in Brazil transforms the war of all against all into the exchange of all against all.

To develop my argument further, a comparative perspective will be useful. I shall introduce this dimension with a question: why not adopt the bargain rather than the gift? This question derives from a certain way of seeing politics for which there are two legitimate forms of political action: the reasoned argument and the bargain. The bargain, for its part, contains both a threat and a promise (Elster, 2000; Habermas, 1996; Schelling, 1980). In this model, value resides in the rational and impersonal argument, not the bargain. Here it suffices to note that the agreement resulting from a bargain is frequently posed as an impersonal argument, what Elster calls "the civilizing force of hypocrisy" (Elster, 2000: 349). The bargain is nonetheless necessary. In cases in which the "force of the best argument" is insufficient, ineffective or impossible (when conflict results from mutually incommensurable and contradictory values, for example), the bargain is a means to construct solutions in which each of the parties agrees to grant benefits to the other side in order to ensure itself other gains. My suggestion is that this model is reasonable for a certain type of society since it expresses values inherent to its form of sociability. Obviously, much can be said on this topic. To save time, though, I shall turn to MacIntyre's description of liberalism as a tradition. Using the work of a philosopher is a trade-off: what is lost in empirical density is gained in clarity and in the synthesis of the exposition. In any event, I shall take it as an expression of a societal ideal. The excerpt that interests us here is as follows: in a society in the liberal tradition –MacIntyre (1988) argues – there is a structural homology (the terminology is mine) between

the political domain and the market. In the market, desires, needs and goods acquire a voice as an expression of individual preferences. The same occurs in politics (see, for example, Druckman and Lupia 2000). In both domains, the preferences of others have a value for the self, insofar as the satisfaction of the former leads to the satisfaction of the preferences of the latter. Consequently, the bargain is configured as the model par excellence of sociability and politics: “Only those who have something to give get” (MacIntyre, 1988: 336). A curious turn of phrase for sure: it presents the bargain as something that for us Brazilians would be perceived as a form of exchange.

The above comparison allows us to introduce the hypothesis that we are faced with at least three types of society: on one side, societies with an individualist ideology; on the other, other societies of a holistic type: in the former, modern political theory represents a way of being that permeates its sociability; in the latter, what prevails is hierarchy, that is, the relation between the parts and the whole (Dumont, 1985, 1966). Between them are the third type, societies, as Aragão has pointed out, “that have passed, or are passing, from holism to individualism, subject to the culture shock of westernization.” In these, the author continues, “the holism/individualism dichotomy is far from accounting for all the complexity of the present ideological reality” (Aragão, 2018: 172). My aim here is to advance further with Aragão’s proposal, making the following suggestion: native theories of the first kinds are only partially consistent with the social reality of the latter kind. Although polemical, the hypothesis allows us to venture the following idea: in the absence of the typical social and ideological conditions of the two former types (the combination of individualism, liberalism and the market economy on one side, and hierarchy, the creation of differences to establish relations and the social emphasis on belonging based on a shared value on the other), it is necessary to make use of other societal arrangements that manage to perform a similar role.

The above typology suggests, then, that theories deriving from societies in which an individualist ideology predominates find it difficult to accept the role of the gift in political relations since their ideology exhorts an absolute distinction between the rule of the institution, on one hand, and the personalness demanded by the gift, on the other. The political theories of individualist societies, in turn and in hypothesis, reflect a certain type of social arrangement that permeates its sociability (as an example of the latter, see Dworkin, 1984, 1989; Rawls, 2005; Walzer, 1983). For these theories, the gift in politics is a residual element that defies explanation. The solution is to encompass the phenomenon through a classification that expresses the values of these societies: thus, Heidenheimer (1989) – who I cite here as emblematic of a certain way of perceiving the phenomenon – claimed that, from the perspective of the ‘western elite’ (his terminology), all forms of corruption are equivalent to forms of exchange. Something similar occurs in Brazilian social thought where exchange in politics is subsumed under other concepts such as clientelism or patronage — which, as we all know, have a negative value. The mechanisms involved in the encompassment and invisibilization of the gift do not just express the hopes for modernity and our path towards a more democratic society in which the gift is swept once and for all from Brazil’s public life (here the dilemma and the ethnographic data travel in opposite directions: see Kuschnir, 2007). But can political activity in Brazil not be conceived through the idea of interests and bargaining? Yes, of course. The problem, once more, is that perceiving the phenomenon from this perspective treats something found at the centre of the action of the agents concerned as an insoluble matter, which is then set aside as a kind of deviation, as we saw above.

To explain this ‘residue,’ I suggest therefore that we adopt the opposite procedure and, rather than translate our system using theories adapted to another kind of society, we take the opposite path and translate these theories for them to make sense within the system we are actually describing. The starting point is the observation that, for our society, the gift does not fulfil the same role, nor does it have the same sense acquired in individualist-type societies. The same applies to the bargain, which, unlike in other societies, is not a word much used by Brazilians in everyday life, still less in politics. My hypothesis is that in Brazilian politics we

encounter two different types of exchange: (i) exchanges modelled on the gift (favours that are given or solicited, in native terms) that are characterized by long, open-ended cycles of prestations and counter-prestations that can contain other cycles of immediate or deferred reciprocity; and (ii) short and closed cycles modelled on the market or, if we prefer, the 'bargain' – more appropriate perhaps than 'business' (see, for example, the use of the latter in Woortmann, 1988). This does not mean that exchanges that adhere to the market model are exchanges of official acts (like votes) for money; rather they are exchanges that foreground self-interest and the equivalence of the things exchanged and, once what was agreed has passed from one side to the other, the exchange is complete. This is a valuative opposition in which value is placed in the long-cycle exchanges rather than those with a short cycle.

Unlike short-cycle exchanges, the central functional aspect of those with a long-cycle is the temporal distance between the prestation and the counter-prestation. It is in the time of reciprocity that the strategies typical to the construction of majorities in the Brazilian parliament develop, including the creation of asymmetries (the government and its allies always have more to give) that is consubstantiated as a system of domination (party leaders and bigwigs, ministers and so on) in which the rituals linked to the gift (spoken agreements, confidence in receiving the counter-prestation, apparent disinterest) are the instruments through which the game is played, known to everyone, although they may feign ignorance (Bourdieu, 1980). Every system is made to (i) increase the capacity to influence the other through (ii) the multiplication of obligations and, therefore, (iii) the networks of dependencies (Abreu, 2006b; Elias, 1983). However, this system possesses an important difference compared to other systems of agonistic exchanges: the counter-prestation of the same value does not necessarily eliminate a prior debt, but can balance the relation with an equivalent debt in the opposite direction.<sup>2</sup> There are two reasons for this. The first and most important is that the emphasis of the system is on increasing the capacity to influence the other and, therefore, it makes sense not to lessen debts but to multiply them. The second is that the political context changes: both the relative values of the prestation and counter-prestation and the capacity to provide favours alter over time. The change may result from the reorganization of the relative strengths of the groups in dispute or from the occupation of State posts. A parliamentarian who is not re-elected cannot distribute relevant favours within parliament, although – depending on the situation – he or she may be able to influence other parliamentarians. As a consequence, the capacity to provide future favours alters the value of the favours of the past. As a regulatory idea (which applies to most cases but not all), temporal distance diminishes the value of what was done (a kind of progressive forgetting that gradually makes the favour bestowed less important).<sup>3</sup> Again, since the value of what was done is subject to alterations, it makes sense to emphasize the debt because it sustains the possibility of acting on the other.

Unfortunately, a description of the mechanisms through which the gift operates in the construction of parliamentary majorities would go far beyond the purposes of this text.<sup>4</sup> But it is possible to summarize them in the following propositions: (i) The two models of exchange enable the Brazilian legislature to organize two different ways of constructing majorities for the approval or rejection of proposals submitted to votes. (ii) Both models are transitive (one can substitute for the other) insofar as they serve the same function. (iii) Each of the models incorporates supposedly opposite and mutually incompatible elements and, as a result of the latter, the models have distinct consequences for the equilibrium of the system of social practices and positions. As the short-cycle exchanges leave no obligations, the actors have more freedom in terms of their future actions; the long-cycle exchanges, on the other hand, bind the parliamentarians within a network of

2 The equilibrium between debts can be seen as inherent to non-agonistic total systems of prestations rather than the agonistic kind (Godelier, 1996).

3 Unlike in other systems of agonistic prestations like Kula (Weiner, 1992). The problem is that it is not an object that circulates and gradually acquires more value; rather these are dyadic relations that sustain one another. Thus the party leader negotiates the interests of those he or she leads in a bloc with the government, but the federal deputy owes the favour not to the government but to the leader who achieved the deal.

4 This is the topic of a forthcoming text, "A crônica do nosso mau destino."

debts and rights that shrink everyone's field of action. From this perspective, trading milk fudge for votes is rational insofar as it forms part of a cycle within a large cycle or implies the opening of a long cycle: allowing oneself to be influenced in this context is equivalent to securing the possibility of influencing the other in the future. Or put another way, it keeps open the flow of exchanges (Simião, 2017). (iv) Any political context is the combination of both models of exchange; they can be found running in parallel (it is possible to encounter both operating simultaneously) or even overlapping (the same actors may be involved in both systems). But it is also possible that one of them is, for a moment of time, dominant at least among particular groups. (v) The dominance of one model over the other is central to the relationship between the executive and the legislature.

Allow me to return to the opposition between interest and disinterest in the long-cycle exchanges. Some of the difficulty in thinking about the gift resides in the attempt to reduce the phenomenon to the sum of interest and disinterest. Seen from this viewpoint, as Derrida astutely observed, the gift represents an aporia: interest contaminates and degrades disinterest, transforming it into a façade, a lie or an excuse, the only solution for which would be ingratitude (which, we all may concur, is no solution) (Derrida, 1991). Bourdieu suggests that the point is other: it is not a question of a logical relationship but of a system of domination (Bourdieu, 1980). Nonetheless, seeing the gift either as an aporia or as a subterfuge that conceals and dissembles domination has very similar consequences. In both models, the result is to empty the gift: its meanings and strength are not its own but arise from the irrationality intrinsic to it or from the interests that sustain it and are located in the field of the unsaid (Caillé, 1981). Perceiving the gift in this form, however, does not explain all our data. Something is left over that this approach is unable to explain. Stating that the gift conceals interest, for example, does not explain our historical incompetence when it comes to substituting it for something else, nor explain how it has continued to exist in a context in which self-interests are prevalent. It may well be, therefore, that its persistence can only derive from the truth it contains – as something, in other words, that, deriving from tradition, encounters meaning (use) in the present moment. Something that survives the ruin of time (Gadamer, 2004: 305 ff).

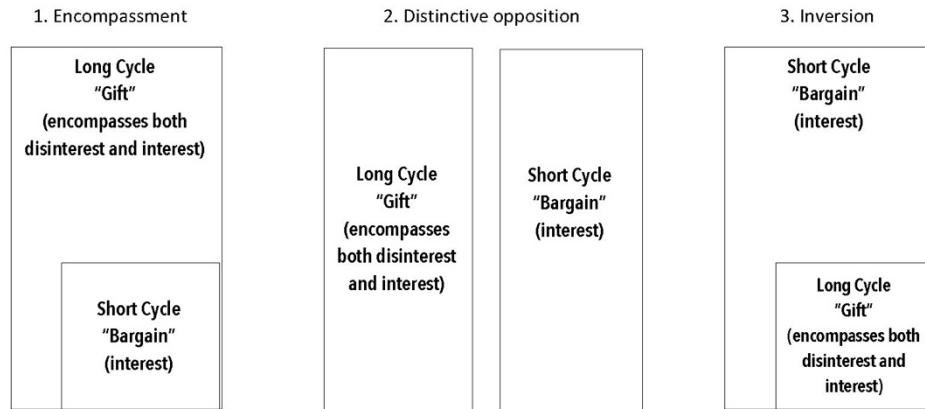
In what sense might the gift not only be logically but grammatically consistent from the viewpoint of a reflection on institutions? (As I argued above, it already is grammatical for agents.) My starting point is the following proposition of Lévi-Strauss: the gift is – he writes – the “most immediate form” capable of integrating “the opposition between the self and others” (Lévi-Strauss, 1967: 98; Beauvoir, 1949). There are various ways of interpreting this phrase. One way is to understand the gift as the logically anterior phenomenon from which the others derive (giving meaning to other experiences that are ‘simple’ in the sense used by Moore 1903: 9): it would be reducible to neither interest nor disinterest. Put otherwise, rather than seeing it as the convergence between discrete operations and what forms part of the flux of our everyday life, it takes the whole as anterior to the parts.<sup>5</sup> In other words, a difference in level exists between the gift and the disinterest-interest pair (the gift encompasses both interest and disinterest). Again, the ethnographic suggestion here is that theories originating from societies with an individualist ideology find it difficult to conceptualise the gift because they cannot cope with hierarchical relations – that is, with the idea of value as an encompassment of the contrary, the difference between levels (no contradiction exists because the higher level is the encompassment and the other two possibilities derive from it) and the possibility of hierarchical inversion (at lower levels value can be inverted). The reductive modern mentality only manages to perceive distinctive opposition and, therefore, is insufficient when it comes to comprehending the phenomenon.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This equates with the methodological principle according to which the sum of the parts is not equal to the whole. Such is Lévi-Strauss's critique of Mauss (Lévi-Strauss, 1968). Lévi-Strauss, however, applied the argument only to the relation between the gift and the three obligations (to give, receive and retribute), asserting that it was the gift that was constituted as the logically anterior element. As I have argued elsewhere, though, Lévi-Strauss repeats the same ‘mistake’ on another level (Abreu, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> As Dumont argued (1966: 396 ff., “Vers une théorie de la hiérarchie”). For a commentary on a value-based anthropology, I refer the reader to Parkin (2002) and Tcherkézoff (1994); for more direct developments of Dumont's ideas, see Barnes et al. (1985).

In the Brazilian case, long and short cycles of exchange acquire meaning in relation to each other, their possibilities expressed in oppositions: gift :: bargain; long cycle :: short cycle; disinterest :: interest. These are organized in three variations: encompassment, distinctive opposition, and inversion, as shown in the figure below. The reader should note that the three possibilities do not correspond to all logical possibilities, only to those ethnographically relevant (specifically, those derived from my own data).



From this perspective, the issue is not the contradiction between two opposite and mutually exclusive categories, but the idea that the gift contains the possibility of disinterest and interest alike. Hence, long-cycle exchanges represent an open set or a field of possibilities in which disinterest can be transmuted into interest, alliance into conflict, travel in the same direction into opposition, the exchange of things into the exchange of offences, agreement into disagreement, and vice-versa.<sup>7</sup> I do not intend any of this to be generalizable to other societies, nor to make historical assertions. Rather I perceive them as relations that organise meaning – as a grammar, perhaps. In this text we have already seen the examples corresponding to each case. Encompassment, for example, is compatible with the idea that politics is contained in the type of relation presumed in long-cycle exchanges, while short-cycle exchanges, as a degradation of the gift, are also a degradation of politics itself (since the gift contains interest, extracting it means losing the unity that is situated on a higher level, resulting, therefore, in a decrease in value). Meanwhile, distinctive opposition is present in the critique made of politics when it expresses self-interest without other mediations – a critique found in the kind of common remarks that we all frequently hear, claiming that Brazil’s problem is that “politicians just care about their own, not others.” The inversion, for its part, corresponds to the need, evident in the ethnographic data, even in the case of an explicit negotiation between conflicting interests, not to dispense completely with the rituals inherent to gift-based relations. This appears most clearly in exchanges of money. In these cases, although nobody is deluded about what is at stake and the interests involved, it is still necessary to use the categories and actions of this other type of relation: in parallel with their transactions, corrupt agents may establish prestations and counter-prestations of a gift type, or at least a simulation of them, in what sometimes appears like a bad joke. Data about the latter case is difficult to obtain given that the secrecy surrounding them is an important part of their functioning. But sometimes it is possible to glimpse these practices when, for some reason, the rule of the secret fails. Alberto Youssef, the money launderer responsible for distributing the funds embezzled from Petrobras to the Progressive Party (PP) and whose phone calls were being monitored

<sup>7</sup> The possibility of the gift containing its opposite can already be found in the literature on the topic, though based on the idea of inversion not encompassment. See, for instance, Mauss (1969) and Sahlins (1974).

by the Federal Police (PF), suffered a heart attack. As he was lying in a hospital bed, he received calls from interlocutors who, after hurriedly wishing him well out of a sense of obligation, asked about the money they were due to receive (Netto, 2016: 33).

The distinction between short-cycle and long-cycle exchanges is not sufficient, however. It resolves just part of the problem since it does not allow us to distinguish, within the short-cycle exchanges, between the ‘bargain’ as a legitimate activity and exchange for money, which everyone agrees would be illegitimate. The solution is to introduce additional distinctions. I shall take these from the Brazilian penal code, which has the advantage of having to dialogue with the practices of public administration in general and politics in particular. The various behaviours that we could call ‘corrupt’ or inappropriate are spread through the chapters of “Crimes against the Public Administration.” In relation to exchange, the relevant articles are 317 and 333, passive and active corruption respectively. Passive corruption is specific to civil servants and the core offence (the description of the kind of criminal act involved) is to request or receive the promise of an ‘improper advantage’ (the expression is taken from the law) to do, delay or omit to do something. Active corruption, on the other hand, is specific to external agents and the core offence is to offer or promise an ‘improper advantage’ to do, delay or omit an official act. The legal discussion is extensive and does not interest us at the moment save for the following aspect: both are formal crimes; that is, they involve a solicitation, promise or acceptance. Note that the term ‘exchange’ is absent from both articles, although it would fit their wording perfectly. But what exactly is an ‘improper advantage’? This appears to reside at the heart of the problem. My hypothesis is that the law presumes (or opens up the possibility of) two distinct types of exchange circuits: one of institutional values considered appropriate by the agents themselves (that which does not need to be hidden) and the other in which institutional ‘values’ are exchanged for other things that would be deemed inappropriate (Abreu, 1996). In my understanding, the former is internal to the institution or the political sphere and the latter is external to them.

But can the ‘improper’ or ‘external’ be distinguished? Here I wish to introduce the idea of inalienable goods, which I take from Thomas (2002). According to the author, Roman law drew a distinction between two types of goods: on one side, inalienable goods that belonged to divine law and public law; on the other, alienable goods specific to private law. Obviously not all goods, whether of the temple or the city, were inalienable: procedures existed to treat some of these goods as property in the strict sense (capable of being disposed of by an act of will, that is, alienable). Inalienable goods were above all those that, in the temples, concerned the moment of their consecration and, in the city, those freely accessible to all citizens and thus pertaining to everyone, using the ‘paradoxical’ (for us) formula of “owned things belonging to no one (*res nullius in bonis*)” (Thomas, 2002: 1432).<sup>8</sup> What distinguishes these two types of goods is the impossibility of inalienable goods being transformed into an economic quantity (which, under Roman law, meant the lack of an appropriate procedure to measure their monetary value). Ultimately, for Roman law, the sacred and the public were opposed to the private. My hypothesis is that the things circulating in Brazilian congressional politics considered appropriate or ‘proper’ (votes, posts, words, institutional movements, demonstrations of esteem, conviviality and so on) ideally and partially assume a sacredness (which in some instances replaces or overlaps their public dimension) but degrade when measured – in other words, when the ambiguity and variation of their value are transformed and fixed as an economic quantity.

However, the gift’s centrality in Brazilian politics leads to another problem: the long-cycle exchanges are incapable of a ‘totalization of the social’ (to recall the expression of Aragão, 2018: 112). This would require an ideological construct capable of encompassing all the rest: representation and immanence, norm and society, the categorical and the conjunctural, the global and individual interest. Such a construct would

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8 In the French original: “choses relevant d’un patrimoine qui n’appartient à personne (*res nullius in bonis*).”

be exterior to the gift and would necessarily contain it or – thinking about the solution of societies of an individualist type – would dislocate it to various derivative or subordinate domains of the social world. In the absence of any such construct, the gift manages to produce in limited fashion this strange alchemy between disinterest, the impartiality of the argument (action does not benefit the self and is made in the name of a generalizable principle), personalness (acting on behalf of someone else’s needs), self-interest and the possibility of transforming the other into an instrument of my own interest. In other words, the centrality of exchange indicates and results from the structuring nature of the misencounter, no longer expressed between observations taken from places of speech very different from each other (an interior town, Congress, courts), but as a structure that shapes the relations between these aspects. In my understanding, it is precisely at the outer limits of long-cycle exchanges that we find the importance of examining the law vis-à-vis this complex set of relations. This is what I intend to do now.

## **A grand narrative**

In contrast to the silence that shrouds the gift in politics, the law enunciates its relation to exchange in a grand narrative centred on the idea that the State is constructed against society (Abreu 2016). I found the first systematic formulation of this idea in the *Ensaio sobre o direito administrativo* (Essay on administrative law) by the Viscount of Uruguai, originally published in 1862 (Soares de Souza, 2002). There may be earlier enunciations of which I am unaware. For the Viscount, though, our political institutions were “a very imperfect and lame imitation of the institutions of the United States” (Soares de Souza, 2002: 497). This, he explained, was due to the lack of the appropriate customs and circumstances to make them work. The Viscount was a practical man. He referred to the autonomy of the provincial assemblies to nominate the occupants of public posts. Rather than autonomy ensuring that opportunities were generalized (among men of the same value, of course), it served as an instrument for one of the “factions [*parcialidades*] into which our provinces were divided” (Soares de Souza, 2002: 465), oppressing the opposite faction or factions. Hence, one faction would appoint ‘its own men’ to provincial offices, the national guard, justices of the peace, municipal councils and so forth, and “thus an impregnable castle was built, not only for the oppressed side but even for the central government too” (Soares de Souza, 2002: 465). Against this, the Viscount proposed two changes in how the State was organised. The first of these was the introduction of administrative hierarchy. This was “an indispensable corrective, especially in those countries where education, the habits of order and legality, respect for rights, obedience to duty and the practical business sense have still not generally penetrated the diverse social classes” (Soares de Souza, 2002: 495). Such a hierarchy would include subordination, tutelage and different degrees of jurisdiction. The second change was to transfer the right to appoint occupants of public posts from the provinces to the central government. If the occupation of posts was an instrument that favoured oppression, it would be better for responsibility for their nomination to be transferred to the “hands of a more distant, more impartial power, less closely involved and interested in personal and local struggles and passions” (Soares de Souza, 2002: 464).

Beyond the obvious questions of institutional engineering, the Viscount’s narrative contains a relationship between ideas that goes beyond those problems he explicitly addresses. I elaborate this relationship through the following points: (A) there is a difference between our social reality and the reality of the countries from which we adopt the State model. What is interesting is that this does not lead us to question the State model and seek another that would represent the more foundational values of our sociability (hospitality, reciprocity, adaptability and so on). On the contrary, it is society, generally speaking, that is expected to adjust to values we have taken from elsewhere. At the same time, the translation into our institutions inverts the meaning of these other values. In individualist European societies values like equality and liberty are predicates and the individual is their subject – in other words, they comprise rights whose main objective is to safeguard

individuals, whether it be from other individuals, or corporations, or ideas, or the State itself. In Brazil, by contrast, values assume the role of subjects in the name of which, very often individuals are sacrificed (Aragão, 2018: 206). (B) it is imagined that society left to its own devices is incapable of regulating itself reasonably; hence, the State needs to intervene to modify its nature or, at the very least, limit the possibility of any harm it may cause itself. At another level, this reflects the social and symbolic distance between parts of Brazil: described somewhat schematically, we have one part, historically linked to the coast, which became a centre radiating culture and social and economic development, serving as a model for the rest of the country that – for a good portion of our history – was left to its own fate. Likewise, the rules of our law need to be constituted in opposition to significant and central portions of our sociability; this means that the law partly assumes the role of a ‘cultural critic’ – a critic, of course, that expresses, deep down, the highly conservative values of just one of the parts of our country. (C) The State model needs to be adapted to our social reality. Such adaptation largely results from a process of trial and error, a negotiation with circumstance. At a symbolic level, this echoes the lack of commitment to the universal application of the rule and, by opposition, the predominance of the contingent and the circumstantial. The outcome is a combination of ideas and practices that, from the perspective of other civilizations, would be mutually incompatible or contradictory (for example, it is the tutelage of the central power over the localities that ensures freedom among the latter). (D) Only at a distance would it be possible for the State to exercise its civilizing role. This, in turn, acquires different meanings according to circumstances and the historical moment. The relations between ideas already formulated in the work of the Viscount would later pervade, not without vicissitudes, the thinking of authoritarian authors like Oliveira Vianna (1883-1951: see Vianna, 1999) and Azevedo Amaral (1881-1942: see Amaral, 2002). They are also present in some form in Victor Nunes Leal (1948), as we shall see shortly.

There is another point not explicitly present but, based on the most recent literature, perceptible that results from the relationship with the above ideas. I refer to the role of hierarchy. Equality and liberty do not serve to organise society for the simple reason that Brazilian society is not only profoundly unequal, it also attributes no central value to the individual. On the other hand – and here, in a certain sense, lies the problem – it also lacks any hierarchical alternative. We can recall that hierarchy is fundamentally an order of precedence, which creates differences in order to construct relations (Dumont, 1966). Hierarchy can even exist within each of the factions (or *parcialidades* to use the Viscount’s language) that control the states or the family. However, society is thereby unable to construct a rule that by itself organises its whole. Hierarchy, therefore, in its modern sense, has to be imposed as an exercise of power.

The discourse of contemporary jurists seems to break with this series of ideas. The more recent narratives begin thus: the law we have today is heir to the Romano-Germanic tradition – a millenary tradition. The meaning of legal instruments is found in the history of this tradition. Along a trajectory passing through the major historical epochs (essentially: primitive society, Greece, Rome, the Middle Ages, the industrial revolution, the modern age) the essence of this legacy gradually emerges and takes shape. What our law affirms through this narrative is that it does not, in fact, pertain to Brazilian society. It is no accident that the history practiced today by the overwhelming majority of our jurists ultimately entails the rejection of history itself (rupture, transformation, incommensurability). Nonetheless, the change does not alter its most structuring aspect: the opposition between State and society. This remains present, transformed by the new circumstances. The work of Leal (1948) acquires a prominent place from this perspective, comprising the midway point between the Viscount’s account and contemporary narratives. Leal describes an electoral practice in which relations between locality, state and central government revolve around a system of reciprocity (or, as I have called it, a system of long-cycle exchanges). In Leal, the nomination of posts by the central government that, in the Viscount’s view, served to mitigate and contain factionalism and the local mode of doing politics, becomes a mechanism of alliance between the federal government and state-level administrations, and between the



latter and the municipalities – what Leal calls the *compromisso coronelista*, the coronelist pact: on the part of the municipality, unconditional support to the candidates from officialdom; on the part of the states, *carte blanche* for the local bosses. Put otherwise, the factionalism of the province during the imperial era found its path to the capital through the electoral politics of the republic. Indeed, what would be more likely: the State modifying society, imposing customs, habits and ideas alien to it, or society resisting, reinterpreting to its own benefit what the State wishes to impose on it?

Two consequences need to be made explicit. First, the geographic distance between Rio de Janeiro and the provinces was, in the Viscount's account, an objective condition: the remoteness of vague news from a few days ago. At the symbolic level, however, it was above all a metaphor for something else: distancing as estrangement. Spatial distance today is no longer enough; it cannot perform its structuring role. In other words, contemporary legal narratives stem from the collapse of space as a metaphor for estrangement. Other distances, more modern estrangements, need to be found. While the State and the law once opposed what was faraway, now law needs to invent a new means of constituting itself as other to what is close by. If it is politics that brings society back to the centre of the State, then the opposition between State and society unfolds on another plane: in the opposition between law and politics within the state itself.

The lucubrations of Brazilian law and its appropriation of foreign legal doctrine and jurisprudence partly relate to the need to construct itself as other to its social context. Nevertheless, since the law needs to be pertinent to the social reality of which it forms part, mechanisms are needed to adapt between a foreign discourse and a local reality. Consequently, it is not easy to understand what it means to say. The relations composing the symbolic system acquire a diffuse character: they are no longer made explicit in the law's narratives. Rather, they are immersed in a diffuse set of texts, discourses, practices, rules and institutions whose relations are only recuperated through the movement of the whole, in the use of esoteric legal instruments. As Riles (2005: 975) argues, "the technicalities of law are precisely where the questions that interest us actually are played out." Neither has contemporary Brazilian law lost adaptability as one of its values. It has simply moved place. It no longer forms part of the explicit argument justifying the norm, but has withdrawn into the unsaid. This phenomenon has already been widely observed in the literature: in the adaptation of the jury court and the truth in trials (Kant de Lima 1991, 1993); in the opposition between the importance that legal doctrine gives to the principle of orality and its application (Baptista, 2008); in the influence on court decisions of moral categories contrary to the rights of defendants (Schritzmeyer, 2020; Nuñez, 2020); in the use of the idea of equality as a means to legitimize inequality (Mendes, 2005; Abreu, 2013a); in the importance of the principle of the judge's freedom to decide and the opposition between real and formal truth (Mendes, 2012), to cite just some examples. In other words, law does the opposite to what it says it does. It dialogues all the time with the society to which it belongs. But this is a dialogue that denies its own condition as a dialogue and constructs itself at a distance, through estrangement and, principally, in silence. An entirely paradoxical conclusion that, nonetheless, fits the data.

Summarizing the differences, we arrive at the following:

In the Viscount's narrative	In contemporary narratives
Our reality is different to the social reality comprising the original home of the model.	The denial of belonging to Brazilian reality through the claim to belong to a tradition that is not its own.
The model needs to be adapted by negotiation with circumstance and contingency. Ad hoc solutions are the result.	The model is not contaminated by our social context since it is the result of a long legal tradition that thinks of itself as continuity not rupture. The outcome is a history that denies history.
Left to its own devices, society is organised locally by one group's oppression of the others.	Law pacifies society and makes it possible.
Combination of contradictory ideas in the narrative that justifies the norm.	Contradiction is perceived in the combination of the diverse planes; that is, in law in movement.
Distance is constructed by geography as a metaphor of estrangement.	Estrangement is constructed by the denial of belonging to a local tradition.
Hierarchy limits and constrains local factionalism.	Law is opposed to exchange in politics.

### A system through and from a distance

The above description showed that law can no longer be imagined as a reflection of the ideas present in spontaneous forms of sociability, or as the expression of the most essential aspects of politics. On the contrary, law sees politics as a contamination, a degradation of itself, and a huge effort is made at discursive level for estrangement and distance to be realized as narrative and identity. In the practicalities of judicial decisions, though, law is always looking to politics and society for its decisions to be possible and make sense – an inglorious and not always successful task. Conversely, politics aims for the legal norm to form part of its cycles of exchange (“for friends everything, for enemies the law” as the old political saying goes): from this perspective, the norm belongs to the set of things that circulate. This formula is imprecise, however, since what circulates, strictly speaking, is the interpretation and application (or not) of the norm. Moreover, similarly to what happens with the law, the conclusion is only partly true. All congressional politics turns on posts, possibilities and gains created by the diverse legal instruments. In the Brazilian case, however, these do not acquire a sense of sacredness vis-à-vis politics and thus cannot structure exchange.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, it is common for politics to use the law to create political facts based on Federal Supreme Court decisions. At this level, the hypothesis of the misencounter means the following: there is no higher-level synthesis of law and politics containing both or an encompassing value capable of ranking them in relation to each other, nor does there seem to exist a deeper structural homology between them that could suggest an organising principle common to the two dimensions of social experience. This is the ethnographic fact, I hypothesise, that needs to be considered in the relation between law and politics: at a discursive level, one negates the existence, substance and legitimacy of the other; at a practical level, one regards the other to understand its own possibilities. They thus dialogue in silence. Consequently, there is no fixed point from which the two can be integrated into a unity from which they derive; instead, there exist two incompatible and incommensurable viewpoints from which their synthesis is no more than an elusive and unattainable impression.

<sup>9</sup> A system of total prestations – agonistic or otherwise – would contain two types of objects: those that circulate between humans and those that circulate between humans and the gods. The objects belonging to the latter form part of another circuit of exchanges, a circuit that logically precedes the former and gives it meaning (see Abreu 1997).

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# Introduction

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In this Vibrant issue, researchers present their results and reflections on experiences of «another possible world»<sup>1</sup>, on the challenges linking waste management, creativity and other environmental issues such as climate change and social vulnerability. We would like to thank all the dossier authors, in particular the ones that participate in our researchers' network linking universities from Brazil with colleagues from Argentina, Uruguay and The Netherlands. We are thankful to all that answered our call for papers and brought their analysis about initiatives that aim to improve the way in which humans live on our planet Earth, a place we like to call our «home».

With its common origins in the word «oikos» (from the Greek language), both ecology and economy intersect in this Vibrant dossier. We share the narrative that there is no «Planet B» and that Pachamama, Mother Earth, Terra or Gaia are all diverse names to call this planet our home. We like to point out that anthropology can contribute to the future alternatives as we all know that the sound life of humans, as well as many other species, do depend on what the humans are doing concerning ecology and economy. This Vibrant number brings anthropological research about experiments that deal with waste and solid residue in order to achieve a better circularity of materials, be them technically manipulated materials (like plastic), be them organic (such as composting).

Inspired by Ailton Krenak, whom we met in person in Amsterdam last year when the activist, philosopher and artist came to receive an award at Dam Square Palace, we wanted to record practices and ideas that will «postpone the end of the world» and denounce greenwashing practices, one of which Krenak denounces as being about the «myth of sustainability» (Krenak, 2020). Recycling, this term, is also a kind of «nirvana concept» (Molle, 2008), in which the capitalist production system sells the possibility that the extractive and destructive effect has some kind of way out.

The articles we have gathered here show and reflect on alternatives to «postpone» the destruction caused by economic policies and actions that undermine and collapse the ecological balance. In this dossier, we give visibility to what is being created on the other side of chaos, bringing together research carried out on the basis of ethnographies on how different planetary inhabitants try to organise their relationships with materials so that they circulate in their life cycles. Is this way of thinking about humans as «planetary inhabitants» a new form of «universalism»? Or earthly thinking, is it a way of thinking of humans as inhabitants of the same village, our blue planet?

<sup>1</sup> We are honouring the slogan «Another world is possible», from the World Social Forums, born in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil.

The texts analyse with how humans in different contexts (be they eroded landscapes, small and large neighbourhoods, residences, communal houses, towns or large megalopolises) deal with these realities that have been as Earth itself, in a permanent «metamorphosis» (Beck, 2016). Solid waste is not just treated as «rubbish», but as polysemic and provocative categories, as it reveals the social structures that produce inequalities within different social groups and also points to new uses and creations.

We open the dossier with an article, by Mariano Perelman, entitled «Informal Collection in Buenos Aires. Behind and Beyond Crises». He shows how waste pickers created a new trade circuit related to (informal) recollection in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The author analyses data he had gathered ethnographically between 2002 and 2011. This is also a very in depth historical description about the people who were struggling to survive and to live in Argentina, Perelman could follow how they went through feeling ashamed of their work to managing a new environmental vocabulary where they feel that they were doing «decent» and «dignified work». He analyses in a very detailed ethnography the differences between generations of waste pickers in Buenos Aires and also the different gender roles in their practices. The paper also brings many images that register the recent history in Argentina” capital and the many related social and economical values involved in the circulation of materials in a city.

In the second article, written by Josefina Tranquilin-Silva and co-authors, we are presented to the lives of waste collectors in Santos, a coastal city in São Paulo state, and how do «they bring their knowledge, sensitivity and intelligence for providing original and creative input to the system or reutilizing waste, including what pertains to the relationship between technology and nature». The authors intertwined philosophical insights from thinkers like Hannah Arendt, Ailton Krenak and Felix Guattari, among others, to make a point that we would like to quote, as we totally agree with it:

(...) urgent times in which we live demand changes to our mindset, if we are to face this deplorable landscape, in three ways. First, we must admit that no agent can, in isolation, provide ready-made answers. We must therefore consider collective participation in the process of organising, developing, and implementing initiatives, accounting for the fields of self-administration, social advocacy, cultural respect, environmental care, and economic solidarity in the micro-spaces of territories (a condition, therefore, is that actions be rooted in a physical territory).

Following this suggestion of locally rooted actions, we want to bring the readers’ attention to the article «Recycling, caring and chatting at the Food Bike», where the authors Jordi Bok and Freek Colombijn analysed the social interactions in a Dutch municipal experiment. The project offered organic residue collection done by bicycle riders in contrast with the big garbage trucks that collect the other kinds of waste in Hengelo. Focused on the social interactions resulting from this more personal way of small scale collection, the researchers found out that exchanges among the «food bikers» and the citizens participating in the experiment went far beyond the goal of separating the organic from the other types of solid residue. Their text is also a report about the difficulties experienced during the Corona pandemic and how it heavily impacted older people. In The Netherlands, «the greying of society» is a metaphor used to refer to a population that is getting «grey» hair, growing older and a country that is seeking ways for the elderly to deal with loneliness. At the end, the authors included a note informing that the Hengelo municipality is discontinuing this experiment. We, as editors of this dossier, have also done research in The Netherlands and we consider it striking how many waste related social experiments have such short lives, one we had studied called 100-100-100 project (Arisi, 2020) was also short lived in many municipalities. It would be interesting to keep on researching in The Netherlands to find out why do municipalities and waste companies put so much effort in designing and implementing these projects and do not opt for continuity, even when they are considered successful for its participants and researchers.



Anthropologists Cornelia Eckert and Carmen Rial, present us with an ethnographic report based on a case study carried out in the city of Zaandam, The Netherlands, in 2019 and interviews with recycling companies' managers and workers done in 2021. The ethnography was developed with companies that manage waste, addressing questions about industrial business logic, the origin of solid residue materials they work with in the recycling and the destination of their products. They also introduce the perspective of residents and the practices on how they collaborate in the materials' recycling and how they perceive the recycling policies in their surroundings. Their pictures and text present solid waste recycling as a dynamic process that can be part of a «circular economy». They reflect upon the contradictions of the industrial world with special regard to the exhaustion of consumption practices, considered to be abusive to the environment.

To follow in the theme of projects that deal with organic composting in an urban setting, the paper written by Camila Bevilacqua and Arthur Imbassahy focus on the experience of indigenous people living in the city of Rio de Janeiro to explain how organic compost «represents this aggregate of relationships: a mixed, heterogeneous pile with great creative power». The garden Dja Guata Porã has a Tupi Guarani name and it becomes a feeder of relationships that show how a good mix can result in composting for feeding new lives, in the same way observed by Bok and Colombijn, the social interactions are fed by the organic residues that is a humus for new lives, resulting in healthier food, soil, worms and people, a «more than-human» anthropological research. Inspired by authors such as the already classic Haraway, Latour, Ingold and Tsing, it also brings the readers' attention to Abrahamsson and Bertoni who specifically researched about the transformation power of vermicomposting and the feeling of «togetherness» when we focus our attention to the rot side of organic life.

The fifth article presented, written by Sonia Gau and Esther Zamboni, presents an analysis based on ethnographic data from interviews with different actors that make up the plastic recycling chain in the city of Las Piedras (Canelones department), in Uruguay. With an interdisciplinary perspective, they seek to make visible the particularities and complexities of this process (plastic recycling) as well as its challenges and opportunities. To do this, observations from different contexts, all of them related to the plastic recycling chain, call our attention to the importance of the involved social actors, to see the sociocultural and economic dynamics involved. We can understand many of these issues as part of what Dunlap (2017) had named as «sustainable violence».

This Vibrant brought together papers that focus on ethnographically showing the «state of the art» of waste when it is not «wasted», annihilated and/or incinerated, but re-enters and circulates in the cycles of use, reuse, repair, recycling, composting - rotting and recovery of materials. Lena Muldoon registers how in The Netherlands «food bikers» not only collect organic food «residue», as in the experiment studied by Bok and Colombijn, but they also engage in «rescuing food» to diminish what would otherwise become food waste and be considered «residue». The ethnography follows the «food rescuers» in two initiatives of small scale projects called «Strawberry» (*Aardbei*, in Dutch) and «Tomato» (*Tomaat* in Dutch), perhaps not by coincidence two red fruits that are fragile and rot quickly. She describes the «multisensory interactions» people have with food and how they recover them from being thrown away and make them circulate in the consumers' network. She was surprised when she realised that the consumer was not being informed that this was «rescued food». There is just one point we do not agree with Muldoon, when considering that the «*Aardbei*» (Strawberry) operates outside of this globalised food system». We understand that we are all part of the same global system, even when some of us try to think of ourselves as «very alternative» and out of the mainstream, we are entangled in lives that interconnect us all. In one of the figures shown in the article, we were happy to see a familiar jackfruit («*jaca*», in Brazilian language) in the basket of a food rescuer Muldoon photographed, a fruit that made all her way crossing the oceans from Asia, Africa or South America to be «rescued» in an European city. The food system as the waste system entangles us all, even when we have different and local perceptions about waste, as the articles in Vibrant dossier shows.

The Gavião indigenous people studied by Maycon Melo are a nice example of how differently social groups experience the relationship to what they consider «waste» and how they classify their «solid residues». The Gavião community has 60 years of experience in dealing with industrial objects waste disposal in their communities that are located quite far from city centres. The ethnologist follows the categories created by the Gavião people when they split the garbage in three sorts: poisonous waste, danger waste, and «our waste». «Our waste» is the non-industrialised organic waste that brings positive potential to humans, since their rotting increases the productivity of the soil in the form of natural fertiliser. Same as explained and experienced by people who also «feed the Earth» in the garden Dja Guata Porã (article five of our dossier), Melo brings Gavião perspective to reflect on the impact of petroleum derivatives in a smaller scale society, same problems big metropolis inhabitants face on a huge scale. The author makes as well another relevant observation rooted in Amerindian cosmologies when he affirms «The idea that we are all children of the same mother Earth, and therefore brothers and sisters, is opposed to the Amerindian ontogenesis perspective» as the indigenous people take a lot of energy creating beautiful bodies to come closer to the ones of mythological times. Not brothers and sisters but living in the same planet house, we can learn from Krenak that states: «there will come a time that the Earth will not answer anymore; you can fill her up with all kind of poison, but she will not respond. She will be a dead Earth. (...) The Earth gets tired»<sup>2</sup>. As Ailton Krenak reminds us, we are facing the Earth getting tired.

Camila Iribarrem and co-authors bring us an ethnography rich in data and analysis of research that examines water and solid waste in two Brazilian capitals: Manaus (AM) and Recife (PE). Contrasts, differences and intersections between public policies on waste management, sanitation and housing are the points that connect this work to emerging socio-environmental issues in water-related ways of life, whether along rivers and streams, tidal areas or oceans. A multi-situated look at the reality of people who live on the water river banks courses and flooded areas are held responsible for dumping waste that overflows into the streets, invading their homes, is based on street ethnography, visual records and comparative studies.

In the article written by Carla Rocha and Eunice Nodari, the scope of winemaking is studied in an interdisciplinary perspective. The work points to the dependence of wine making on environmental factors and how this production is associated with several negative environmental impacts. The authors highlight the increase in waste derived from the wine industry. It also points to the need to overcome the problem, especially in face of the transformation provoked by climate change. The ideas linked to the concept of «circular economy» became a guiding principle for the reconfiguration of this field, both in terms of diminishing the aforementioned negative impacts and exploring other related potentials. Focused on the South Brazilian context, it presents particularities of local winemaking and the advancement of research about solid waste management. At the same time, it points to the obstacles that arise while achieving greater circularity in this field.

Is there utopia in imagining, creating and putting into practice what our future could be like? Precious Egboko and Freek Colombijn help us think about these «utopias of recycling» - a theme we had explored in an academic event we organised linking our research network online to debate topics now presented in this dossier. Egboko and Colombijn registered the activities carried out in the «repair cafes», also studied by Arisi (2020). Created by a Dutch woman in The Netherlands, the repair cafes have spread to the United States of America and to other European countries. The Repair Cafes are an experiment that links owners of broken objects and volunteers that offer for free their services willing to help others to repair their stuff, they also promote - like the «food bikers» - social solidarity and bonding. All these people come together to rescue broken domestic equipment, toys, and clothes in a glimpse of how important social solidarity is. Although their

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<sup>2</sup> Arisi's translation from Krenak in an interview with Tainá Aragão (ISA, 2023).

economic effect is still small, repair cafes are a step forward in achieving a circular economy as they motivate participants to keep industrialised objects and their materials a bit longer in their life cycles, avoiding them to become «wasted» and getting dumped or ending some parts of their material cycles in waste incinerators, like it is common in North Europe.

The following article, written by Maria Raquel Passos Lima, theorises the anthropology of waste as an appropriate field of knowledge for thinking and acting in the contemporary world characterised by climate change. The author proposes waste as an object of study and action that provides a privileged analytical key to understanding cities as «Anthropocene urban landscapes». By defining the anthropology of waste as «epistemologies of the Anthropocene», she outlines a conceptual overview of the discussion that provides a set of theoretical, methodological and political questions. In conclusion, waste policy is also conceived as knowledge policy, outlining a research agenda for this expanding field of studies as a strategy to point out possible paths for action.

In the audiovisual session, we are happy to present an interview we made with the director of the Central de Cooperativas de Materiais Recicláveis do DF e Entorno (CENTCOOP-DF), Aline Souza. She made Brazilian history for being the representative of the Brazilian people to hand over the presidential sash to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in his third term. She has dedicated her life to organise a huge contingent of workers. Currently, Souza is the coordinator of the National Movement of Waste Pickers, representing the Federal District, and is a member of Unicatadores' National Secretariat for Women and Youth. Aline is also the mother of seven children (Ariela Vitória (2 years old), Alef Josimar (4 years old), Alexandro Airan (6 years old), Arthur (9 years old), Adriano (12 years old), Adriel (13 years old) and Andrei (15 years old). She also studies Law and is the daughter and granddaughter of women who managed to live and raise their daughters and sons by rescuing materials that had been «discarded».

Aline Souza is «our heroine», and we are proud to have her words and thoughts registered in this academic journal, her life as a practitioner of the «utopia of recycling» brings a bright light and irradiates in Vibrant. Her voice shows us how important it is to pay attention to the diversity of knowledge, and we believe that this is one of the main contributions anthropology can make: to bring respect to knowledge diversity inside the academia. We are very proud to have interviewed Aline Souza and we hope to contribute to Centcoop-DF in future projects in the area of mutual educational exchanges. We are sure that universities have a lot to learn from the ways in which waste pickers' cooperatives organise themselves, as well as being able to offer space on university campuses so that waste pickers' cooperatives can work and separate the materials produced by universities. Universities still have a lot to do as homework in the management of «solid waste» (Firkow, Freitas 2019) and Centcoop/DF certainly has a lot to teach to universities.

The following photographic essay made by Ana Goldemberg shows us, in a sensitive gaze, ways of life and resilience in the open-air dump of the city of Oberá, Misiones, Argentina. The work establishes a dialogue with concepts from Anna Tsing, Isabelle Stengers and Donna Haraway, and it brings us images to reflect on multispecies collaborations and the possibilities of survival in a contaminated environment.

Finally, anthropologists Carmen Rial and Cornelia Eckert seek to explore visual language to support ethnographic experiences on solid waste recycling carried out in The Netherlands in September 2019 and December 2021. Detailing an image narrative that reports their ethnography through a street photography process and interviews with their interlocutors, situations are observed and recorded, reflecting on residual phenomena, removed from the vision field, attention is paid to the foreground and the different regimes of invisibility of waste.

As utopians, we expect this dossier will inspire other practitioners and researchers to get into the world of recovering what is possible on this planet with finite resources and in making the human and social sciences participants in feeding the Earth. We want to close this introduction, paying tribute to writer Eduardo Galeano.

He recorded the answer given by his friend the Argentinean filmmaker Fernando Birri, when students asked Birri, in Cartagena de las Indias, Colombia: «what is the use of Utopia?» Birri answered the students that utopia rests in the horizon, that he would walk some steps, utopia would also walk some steps further away from him and that was what utopia was good for, to make him keep on walking.

The original in Spanish, as Galeano, wrote it, we reproduce below:

La utopía está en el horizonte.

Camino dos pasos,

ella se aleja dos pasos

y el horizonte se corre diez pasos más allá.

¿Entonces para qué sirve la utopía?

Para eso, sirve para caminar.

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# Informal Collection in Buenos Aires: Behind and Beyond Crises

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the creation process of a new circuit of commerce (understood as a space where moralities, money, and people circulate) related to *cirujeo* between 2002 and 2011. While the informal gathering is as old as Buenos Aires itself, in 2002, the agenda of two crises (economic and environmental) combined to position *cirujeo* not only as a survival activity but also as an activity linked to the environment. The article argues that although the crises framed the new circuit that disrupted gender relations, the groups within the collectors, and how they constructed the activity as a legitimate way of making a living, the danger of presenting *cirujeo* only as an epiphenomenon of the crisis is raised. To this end, the text gives an account of the different sedimentations that have produced how collecting is done today.

**Key words:** Economy, crisis, informal collection, Buenos Aires, making a living.

# Recoleção Informal em Buenos Aires: Mias aqui e além das crises

## Resumo

Este artigo se concentra no processo de criação de um novo circuito de comércio (entendido como um espaço onde circulam moralidades, dinheiro, pessoas) relacionado com o cirujeo entre 2002 e 2011. Enquanto a coleta informal é tão antiga quanto a própria Buenos Aires, em 2002 a agenda de duas crises (econômica e ambiental) combinou-se para posicionar cirujeo não apenas como uma atividade de sobrevivência, mas também como uma atividade ligada ao meio ambiente. O artigo argumenta que enquanto as crises emolduraram o novo circuito que perturbou as relações de gênero, os grupos dentro dos colecionadores e a forma como eles construíram a atividade como uma forma legítima de ganhar a vida, ele levanta o perigo de apresentar o cirujeo apenas como um epifenômeno da crise. Para isso, o texto dá conta das diferentes sedimentações que produziram a forma como a coleta é feita hoje.

**Palavras-chave:** economia, crise, coleta informal, Buenos Aires, ganhando a vida.

# Informal Collection in Buenos Aires: Behind and Beyond Crises<sup>1</sup>

Mariano Perelman

I met Gabriel a few weeks after he started collecting in August 2002. At 42, he had been unemployed “for a while.” First, he “managed” by doing *changas* (sporadic and temporary jobs). Then, the *changas* became increasingly spaced, and the money he was gaining was not enough. Finally, two years after starting to collect, he told me:

“One of my neighbors came, and he told me, ‘Negro, go out with me. You’re not doing anything here.’ At first, I didn’t want to; I was ashamed; I didn’t want my family or my neighbors to see me *cirujeando* [collecting]. But I went out one day. I made some money. It was difficult. Search in the garbage, the people who look at you. But here I am [he says between laughs and next to his cart]. I understood that this was a job like any other. People look at you badly; you can cut yourself; they can run over you. But you also meet people all the time, the *clients*, you have a good time, the street. You go around the world.”

Like Gabriel, dozens of people with whom I did fieldwork between 2002 and 2015, and thousands in general, began to search through the garbage for materials that could be sold, reused, or consumed as the primary way of accessing resources for “making money.”<sup>2</sup> For many of them, earning a living from garbage implied a break -sometimes- in their work trajectories and -sometimes- in social ones. In a short time for thousands of people, the collection became a way of making a living.

I center this text on *making* the new trade circuit related to (informal) recollection in Buenos Aires, Argentina, between 2002 and 2011. Although the informal collection is as old as the city itself, it was in 2002 that the new circuit was generated. My argument is simple. It was in 2002 when the agenda of two crises (economic and environmental) combined to position collection not only as a survival activity but also as an activity linked to the environment. The relationship between informal recovery and the environment -recycling- is not natural. It is how a process of impoverishment was built as a public problem.

*Cirujeo* is not a mere epiphenomenon of the crisis. In the first place, the temporalities of crisis are often problematic; secondly, crisis as rupture does not let us see the complexities of the process both locally and globally. The problem of residues as part of the Anthropocene or the *Capitalocene* has its global dimension (Alexander and Reno, 2012; Eckert, Rial, and Colombijn, 2020; Rial, 2016). Paiva (2008), studying the politics of the 1990s, states that all international agreements and conferences aim to propose strategies applicable to all parts of the world: the policy of the 3 Rs (reduce, recycle and reuse). However, although Latin America’s governments took up these measures, “both the modalities of production and consumption as well as the paths through which waste recovery occurs are different from those exhibited by the First World ( ... ) In its cities with low or null collection coverage, absence of sites suitable for final disposal and high poverty rates, there are many people who survive from the collection and sale of waste.

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1 A first version of this text was presented at the I International Colloquium Utopias of Recycling. I am gratefully for the comments received especially by Cristhian Cajé, Barbara Arisi, Freek Colombijn, Carmen Rial, the participants of the Colloquium and the anonymous reviewers.

2 During the text, I will use different categories to refer to the people dedicated to looking for materials that can later be sold, used, or reused. I prefer to talk about people who search in the garbage instead of “informal collection” since referring to informality implies taking a position and a differentiation between different fields (the formal and the informal) that does not allow the understanding of the complexities that are produced in the field.



Without intending it, they put into motion one of the actions recurrently suggested by environmentalism: the recovery of waste, although in paths different from those proposed in international Conferences and Agreements". Years later, when this circuit was established, criticisms will also come about the uncritical use of other notions, such as the "circular economy." (Carenzo, Juárez y Becerra, 2022; Gutberlet *et al.* 2017; Gutberlet y Carenzo, 2020; Suárez, 2021).

Environmental discourse (and the "moral economy" related to it) will begin to appear as a justification regime (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991) with an intrinsically recognized validity. The *cartoneros* did a vital work of installing their practices within that regime.

Since 2002, in Buenos Aires, a new circuit of commerce was created concerning garbage. I depart from the position of Zelizer (2008). For the author, each circuit (as conversation, exchange, interaction, and mutual determination) has agreements, practices, information, obligations, rights, symbols, and means of exchange. She distinguished by four elements: a border; a set of significant interpersonal ties; associated economic transactions; and a medium of exchange.

Combining these four elements generates an institutional structure reinforcing credit, trust, and reciprocity (Zelizer, 2004). For Zelizer, the circuits would resemble exchange spheres (Bohannan, 1955).

However, it is necessary to understand the intense work in the configurations themselves, allowing us to appreciate different regimes of value not only in different circuits but also in the same circuit.

My argument is that *cirujeo* as a legitimate way of access to living must be understood from the changes in the "world of work" and the "world of *cirujeo*" in a given context. This requires a look focused on the crisis but also "beyond" that allows understanding surgery not as a mere process of lack or negative (crisis, job loss) to understand the nuances and forms of survival in Argentina.

For this, it is essential to look more behind and beyond crisis. So, I will go a little further on Zelizer's notion. There are common arenas -grammar- of discussion within the circuits and multiple ways of understanding value(s) that are situational. Within the trade circuit, different justification regimes can coexist. Circuits contain arenas of discussion in which one or several correct forms and regimes of value and ways of living are settled. The Economy and circuits of commerce cannot, then, be thought of abstractly. Regimes of justification and the practices of actors are constitutive of the Economy. The concrete actions, the interactions are -and here is another difference with Zelizer's proposal- this circuit. How people conceive the activities that are legitimate to be carried out impacts the ways of working, exchanges, and on pricing. In short, in the Economy.

To understand these long-lasting processes -behind and beyond the crisis - and show the nuances of crises as ruptures- I focus from a perspective centered on legitimate ways of (earning) a living (Fernández Alvarez and Perelman, 2020). At the same time, I am interested in showing how these long-lasting processes and the dynamics produced as part of the crises - that made disputes on conceptions of values (based on the struggle of the *garbage*, aesthetics, and the activity itself)- generated new forms con *collection* and gender relations: ways of being *cartoneros* and *cartoneras*.

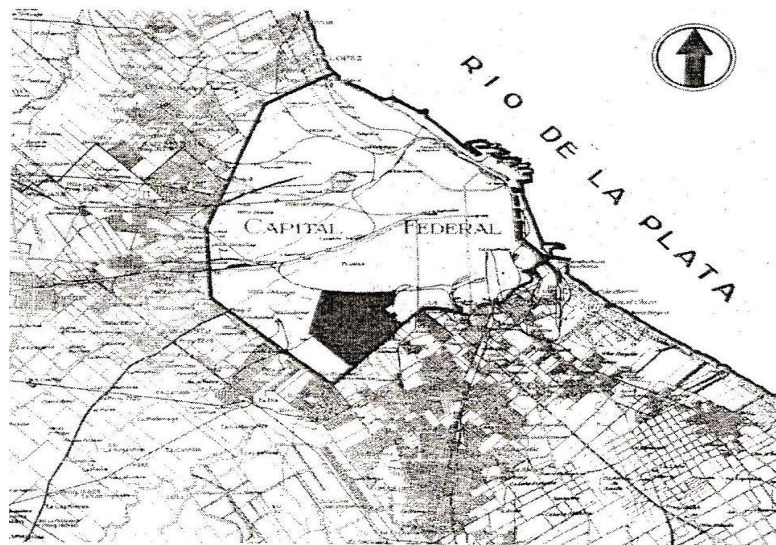
## Before Crises

Periodizations are always forms of ordering processes. I will order the "history" of the *cirujeo* in three moments. A first one, until 1977 with the closure of the Burnings. A second moment between 1977 and until the beginning of the 21st century. Finally, I will focus on the process after the 2001 crisis and the massive appearance of the activity on the public agenda. This periodization may seem forced given that, as some studies have pointed out (Paiva, 2008; Schamber and Suárez, 2007; Suárez, 2001), the increase in the number of people had begun in the mid-1990s. With the implementation of neoliberal policies during the Menemist decade

(1989-1999), unemployment and social precariousness grew. In this framework, thousands began looking for alternatives to what they used to earn a living. However, it was with the “crisis of 2001” that a new circuit was configured, not only because of the massive number of people collecting but also because it gradually became a public problem that ended up configuring the circuit.

The first moment refers to what I have called “limited territories” (Perelman, 2008). For almost a century, until 1977, it is possible to find two forms of (informal) collection in the search for materials in the city. Another looked for materials in the *Quemas*, open-air dumps on the city’s outskirts.

Although hygienist and medical perspective on waste and on the people who live in or from garbage is not an exclusive process of Buenos Aires<sup>3</sup>, local configurations produced specific ways of living, as in “The *Quema del Bajo Flores*.”



FUENTE: BOLETÍN DE OBRAS SANITARIAS DE LA NACIÓN, 1941

The horse-drawn trucks first and the motorized after arrived at the *Quema*, opened their rear doors, and dropped “the garbage.” Then, hundreds of people -generally men- began to separate what they could sell. Once the load was dumped, machines worked that spread the dump and, simultaneously, made a pit to be completed by the unloading of other trucks. Once the burden of the trucks had been overturned, the *cirujas* ran to collect what fell. Juan remembers that “the machine wouldn’t let us gather in peace. Because it’s by the hour, so it operates constantly, it can’t stop”. Between its going back and going forward, “we were going to gather ourselves,” he remembered. He also recalled that “it was good because it spreads the garbage. So you can find... below, you discover everything.” The machine used to wait for them, says another of those who worked for several years in the *Quema*.

The idea that the formal employees used to wait for them shows the relationships established over the years between those who worked in the *Quema* and the *cirujas* who collected there. “The ‘*Quema*’ was a pile of dirt and garbage. The municipal trucks came in and dumped everything there. It was catching fire all the time (...). They gathered paper, made canvases, and put it there. I went with the truck, loaded it, and bye...” a man who was a paper buyer in 1970<sup>4</sup> commented to us. The “*Quema*” was a moral world where conflicts and the ability to collect were produced from the status granted by violence (Perelman, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> For the case of Rio de Janeiro see Lima (2021).

<sup>4</sup> Interview by Verónica Paiva and Mariano Perelman in April, 2008.

FOTO 1: DESCARGA EN EL VACIADERO DEL BAJO FLORES



FUENTE: REVISTA ATLÁNTIDA, AÑO 48, N°1184, 1965

Violence, garbage, marginality, and poverty were how the people who lived from waste were seen, and how several told me about their experience in the burning. One of them recalls that “everything was marginal, always people who were outside the law, or escaping, or liked the easy life, alcohol, or had decided to live violently.”

That violent life was part of the garbage trade circuit. One of the few newspaper articles describes the *Quema* as: “big business. (...)the intermediaries who sell glass, cardboard, rags, and metals will know! A series of factories – some employing more than a hundred workers – are supplied daily from the dump, opening their sheds to receive caravans of trucks and cars with carefully specified merchandise (...) The tentacles of this thriving industry are those ragged beings that swarm in the burns (...) ‘Tincho’ started two years ago with a dilapidated Ford and now owns three latest model units” (Petcoff, 1965: 23).

The spatiality -the garbage dump located on the margins- as well as the characteristics of the *Quema* (garbage mountains in flood-prone areas, with constant fires), who and can collect (through violence), and the way of life of the collectors were configuring this “great business” as a marginal and illegal one. It is neither the people nor the objects that configure legal or illegality. The production of markets as illegal and marginal is related to the capacity of actors to impose and mobilize arguments (legal, morals, aesthetics) that produce forms of legitimation. Forms of legitimation are always disputed. In the case of the *Quema*, for example, violence was a legitimate form within the configuration but was contested by outside actors. Violence was part of that circuit (Perelman, 2020). The way in which economic practices are generated must not be understood as if these circuits were contaminated (by illegality, by violence). These discourses and practices are part of the economic practices themselves. These specificities are what produce values.



The production of value also refers to the esthetic of the dump as a political artifact related to a marginal and illegal place.

The aesthetic is not only an artistic condition or an attribute of beauty. From an aesthetic, it is possible to appreciate struggles to impose life forms and projects that construct 'the social.' Aesthetic as moral values generates borders between groups and between legitimate ways of thinking about what is valuable and worthy.

There is no natural relation between aesthetics and marginalization. It is a social construction based on the recognition of what is valuable. The production of value is processual (Munn, 1992). As the case of garbage shows -in its complexity- it is possible to go beyond the materiality of value (expressed in values forms) (Munn, 1992; Graeber 2001, Turner, 2008). A practical and situational approach to values goes beyond the idea that "people invest their energies into the things that they consider most important" (Graeber, 2001: 55) to center on the ways people manage to use the notion of worth situationally, produce value in different spheres of life and mobilizing it (Perelman, 2022a). So, value is not only social action through which people demonstrate their belief in what is the good life (Graeber), but it is also a moral, situational discourse that can be used.

In the *Quema*, smells, colors, garbage, clothes, and charts have configured a marginal aesthetic. When the world of *Quema* was finally dismantled, a territorialized waste recovery circuit had already been created.

The closure of the *Quema* was part of a re-aestheticization of the city. The civic-military dictatorship (1976-1977) carried out a plan to elitist Buenos Aires (Oszlak, 1991). In this context, a new collection system based on "ecological burial" was implemented. To this end, the Coordinación Ecológica Área Metropolitana Sociedad del Estado (CEAMSE) was set up, a company created by the states of the Province of Buenos Aires and the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires to carry out the integral management of Solid Urban Waste in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area. As Sorroche (2016) stated, the system contemplated all the stages of waste management (collection, transfer, and burial). The development belts inspired it in London and Sydney, where the filling of flooded land was proposed -through the waste - to create parks on these "new" lands later. The collection system went from being deposited in landfills and home cremation to burial. The residents had to leave the waste bags on the sidewalks for the companies to collect them.

The new system transformed the *cirujero*. Until then, the (informal) collectors had access to the garbage. But, since 1977, the entrance of informal collectors to landfills has been prohibited. Once the waste was on the sidewalk, it became the property of the collection companies that charged the municipality per ton collected. Even more, *cirujero* was prohibited. Garbage acquires a new economic value: by quantity. The more companies collect, the more they earn. In short, during the 1970s, "a unique discourse was developed in favor of indiscriminate collection and final disposal. This system was in force until the crisis of sanitary landfills and the emergence of the phenomenon *cartonero* at the hinge of the new millennium" (Suárez, 2021: 3).

## Second moment. From the crises

As I said, it was towards the end of 2001 and the beginning of 2002 that the *cirujero* began to gain public notoriety. The Argentine economic situation had been deteriorating. By May 1999, 27% of people were poor. In October 2002, the 51. Unemployment was 15.4 % in May 1999 and 17.8 in October 2002 (with a peak of 21.5 in May). Between 2001 and 2002, the situation was urgent: "poverty" acquired public notoriety and, as part of it, the *cartoneros*.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> According to Adissi (2003), in 2001, the *cartoneros* did not constitute a topic "in its own right" in the Media. However, towards the end of 2001, and with the diffusion of the increasing indices of poverty, the first photographs began to appear in the Buenos Aires newspapers without extending their presence to explain the "phenomenon." After the December 19 and 20 crisis, the first articles entirely dedicated to the *cartoneros* appeared. The main concern was to "unravel" how people provided themselves with an income. At the same time, the notes focused on the activity's legal framework (its prohibition).

The *collectors -cirujas* turned into *cartoneros*- appeared as a product of the economic crisis. In my observations and public appearances, the *cartoneros* and other actors marked the *cirujeo* as a “*rebusque*” –a way of earning a living but not a job- because of the lack of employment.

During my fieldwork, I could appreciate the shame women, especially men, felt for being *cartoneando*. Looking down and trying not to be seen were standard practices.

As a 51-year-old woman, Estela told me, “We were on the *lona* [without any money], then one day I told my husband, ‘I’m going to dedicate myself to *cirujear*.’ He didn’t like the idea, but there was no other choice. You don’t know what happened with the family, that we dedicate ourselves to *cirujear!*”, She said in 2004 while she laughed. It was not an easy decision to make. “I was ashamed since I came from a factory, I was ashamed, but then that’s it, everything went away, and I went out for *cirujear* with the cart.” However, the first months were difficult, especially going through the neighborhood where she inevitably ran into friends who saw her *cirujeando*. “I didn’t want to take the cart around here [she refers to the neighborhood]. So do you know what I did? she asks me with a little embarrassment; I gave it to my boys so they could take it to the train”.

Felipe, -a forty-year-old collector, remembers with nostalgia the times when he worked in a restaurant before his “fall.” In an interview in July 2003, he told me, “I had a remunerative job with which I could provide medical care for my children and security. I’m not saying outstanding economic security, but at least to say well ‘the month that He comes, I’m going to earn so much, I’m going to buy him a pair of slippers, a pair of shoes, a coat.’ Or do, like when I worked in a restaurant (...) I had the opportunity to go, take them to a movie, buy a good television (...) those things”. When, at the end of 1999, he was left without a job as a kitchen assistant, during that year and the following two, he dedicated himself to doing odd jobs that paid him “without a problem.” At the same time, his wife asked for the *plan*.<sup>6</sup>

But in 2002, even the odd jobs ended. A neighbor began to invite him to *cirujear*. It was difficult for him to decide since he had always viewed those who carried out the activity negatively. He thought they should look for a job and dedicate themselves to “work” and not “laziness.” He didn’t want to go out with a cart and be seen. He started *saliendo* [going out] with his friend. He remembers that when he left the house, he would look to all sides, trying not to be seen by the neighbors. He speeded up until he reached the station and took the *Tren Cartonero* [cardboard train]<sup>7</sup>. Once on the train, he calmed down a bit. During the first months, he lamented his fate; he walked, trying not to attract the attention of people who came across him.

Over time, he understood that being a *ciruja* cannot be hidden. He noticed that many did not accept him. “Look, I don’t steal; I look in the garbage!” He says, angry and hurt. “If I could work in a restaurant, I would go there immediately.” For Felipe, being a *ciruja* - as it is not a “remunerative job”- was opposed to work. He contrasts collecting with a dignified life (based on access to places, consumption, and dignity). Although *collecting* was shameful for him, he refers to the activity in opposition to other ways of obtaining money, such as theft. Compared to the restaurant one, collecting was not ‘work.’ But, It was a work –although “not as much work”- opposed to other activities.

Shame and dignity, work and non-work, are not opposites. Work is a field of dispute that acquires situational meanings, different forms, and contours. It is a category that is used situationally. Thus, the same activity can be considered work, and others not (anonymous). Subjects tend to justify their actions within an “ethics” framework about what is considered fair (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991). People appeal to public modes of recognition. In this sense, the *cartoneros* justify their actions by appealing to the notion of work and of “decent work.” This active work of framing and naming allows the production of (self) value based on what collectors consider morally correct.

6 He was referring to the social plan *Plan Trabajar*.

7 A special train for the *cartoneros* to go to the city.

In addition, the relationship between unemployment and *cirujeo* is also part of a public discourse produced during the crisis. In 2005, a foreign colleague asked me to contact one of my informants for an interview. After much thought, I decided to contact he/her with Juan, a collector with long experience in the activity.

I met Juan in 2002 at one of the “dialogue tables” organized by the Urban Recovery Program (PRU). This program was created within the city’s Ministry of the Environment, which sought to generate policies to formalize the collectors.

Juan knew well the history of the *cirujeo*, the changes, and the current policies.

So, one day we went to Juan’s house in a shantytown in the former territory of *The Quema*. It was time for the interview after the presentation, informal talks, and a walk around the house and the neighborhood. Then my colleague asked him since when he was a *cartonero*. Before answering, Juan looked into my eyes and held his gaze for a few seconds. Then he turned his head towards his/her interlocutor and replied: “Since 2001, with the crisis. Due to unemployment.” He continued to tell him/her how in 2001 the country had had a severe crisis, that there was a lack of work, and that he had lost his job as a truck driver and had to *cirujear*.

I knew that Juan had been collecting since the 1960s, first in *La Quema*, then in the Buenos Aires suburbs -when the civic-military dictatorship evicted him- and later again in the city. I always thought that Juan had sought my complicity in that look. I understood that “crisis” and “employment” were two public discourses that legitimized *cirujeo* as a legitimate way of earning a living. Juan appealed to those public grammars to position himself. If, until the 2000s, the *cirujeo* was considered a highly stigmatized activity, “the crisis” allowed old cartoneros to comfort their history and new ones to enter (Perelman, 2015). As in the case of Estela, the normalization of the activity generated a facility to think of *cartoneo* as a legitimate way of earning a living. She continues talking about a life “that we did not seek” and of being “all the people who worked and wanted to have their job well and be looked upon like anyone else.” But, also that “later I saw that a lot of people began to *salir* [going out], it was not a strange thing.” Even today, she feels watched, but she no longer cares, “you feel ashamed the first time, or many times when they are looking at you. You turn around and realize that people are looking at you, that you open a bag, and you are taking out what they left inside”.

According to Narotzky and Besnie (2014: S4), crisis “refers to structural processes generally understood to be beyond the control of people but simultaneously expressing people’s breach of confidence in the elements that provided relative systemic stability and reasonable expectations for the future.” In Argentina in 2001, the structural conditions -poverty growth, unemployment- meant that people could not have expectations about their near future. The times of crisis “drive people, if not compel them, to adapt their old modes of livelihood to changing conditions and to create new ones (...) Crisis contrasts with forms of stability that enable the design of projects and that support the trust that existing configurations will enable the realization of those projects” (Narotzky y Besnier, 2014: S7). For a large sector of society, the lack of support from family networks, the labor market, and from the State led to forms of uncertainty -a lack of certainty about the future and to have tools to act in a “correct” or “appropriate way (Visacovsky, 2019). So, they have difficulty creating possible forms of the admissible future and present saturation (Lomnitz, 2003).

The possibility of going out to collect was related to “another crisis”: one of the sanitary landfills created by the civil-military dictatorship. In addition, this process was combined with the slow development of environmental discourses as a legitimate way of demanding, thus part of a new rights agenda (Merlinsky, 2013). Leite Lopes (2004) called this extensive worldwide process the “Environmentalization of social conflicts.”<sup>8</sup>

8 According to Leite Lopes “The issue of the environment began to occupy a prominent place in the current democratic process, becoming an integral part of it. The environmental claims attracted the media’s interest for a “new type of citizenship actions”. It was the fact that they did not originate from political groups but from civil society organizations, which opened a new field of interest for the media – and not only for it, once other areas saw themselves equally renewed in this process. They can be cited for the constitution of new professional specialties, for the possibility of articulation and integration between the scientific community and civil society and, even, at the same time, new forms of action together with the judicial system” (Leite Lopes, 2004: 198).

Crises generate uncertainty based on moral values and current ways of living. Crises stress what people consider valuable (Narotzky and Besnier, 2014). And in that sense, it is that crises enable new ways of positioning themselves legitimately. Expectations about the future (and experiences about the past) generate forms of action. And they are moments when they become tense, and fields of possibility open up.

As I said, values are not only a moral dimension of life. It is also a form of demand. Concerning waste, for example, new (moral and values) “concepts and principles” began to question waste management (circular economy; zero waste; Extended Producer Responsibility) (Suárez, 2021), as well as a series of policy changes marked by “contingencies.”

In 2002, during the campaign for the Mayor’s election, the primary opponent of the current Government, the right-wing candidate Mauricio Macri considered that there was a “crisis in the final management of waste and *cirujeo* was absolutely out of control.” Macri said, “This is a million-dollar business, and the cartoneros have a criminal attitude because they steal the garbage. In addition, they do not pay taxes, and their work is inhumane (...); they cannot be on the street. We will get them off the street (...), Exercising the law. They are committing a crime.” He clarified that if they continue on the street, “I’ll take them into prison. You cannot disturb the order in something that is a crime, because it is as much a crime to steal the garbage as it is to rob a man on the corner (...) So, I call thousands of people to contest, and I give them work.” (*La Nación*, August 27, 2002 Interview to Mauricio Macri).

Macri synthesized many current discussions in the interview: environmental crisis, “crime,” and the collection as “a non-work/ job.” During my fieldwork at the dialogue tables, I was able to appreciate how this impacted the generation of policies “for” the cartoneros. For example, one of the members of the PRU told me that “Macri’s position as a result of this internal policy helped (...) The Government acts as a reaction by removing the green bags”, which, he continues, “was released in a hurry because something had to be done.”

Crises -the position of Macri can also be understood as part of them- enabled new discussion frameworks, such as the laborization of the activity with the environment. I often heard cartoneros say they “were working” instead of “stealing.” Later that “work” was interrelated with environmental care. In 2007, I found at Juan’s house on the table a copy of *An Inconvenient Truth* written by Al Gore -Vice President of the United States from 1993 to 2001 and Democratic presidential candidate in 2000. This book was dedicated to global warming. When I asked him about the book, he told me that he had bought it because they [the cartoneros] were taking care of the “environment.”

In my conversations, I heard the cartoneros refer to the value of their work in environmental terms.

If shame prevailed in the collectors during the first years, being working (and taking care of the environment) had become a central component of pride. It also configures the possibility of presenting themselves as legitimate actors. Environmental and economic crises were moments when garbage acquired a new value: economic and social.

That economic value was linked, above all, to the garbage market. The social, on the other hand, to the recognition of the work of the cartoneros.

I am not saying that economic value was new. However, during the crises, there have been new ways of thinking about values and the possibility of moving value from one sphere to another.<sup>9</sup> Both crises make possible de discussion on the values of collectors’ works and waste. Regarding the (new) circuit of commerce born during the crises, the struggles show the cultural structuration of values beyond the economic dimension.

9 I must clarify that I am not thinking on spheres as close. I return to Guyer’s (2004: 30) proposal on changing the focus from a structural vision of “spheres of exchange” to the historical constitution of conversions and the creation of wealth in “turbulent conditions”. “What Bourdieu refers to as the “social alchemy” of the “endless reconversion of economic capital into symbolic capital” (1977: 195) will appear at more junctures and be more varied than the spheres model implies. The geographical and temporal reach that particular conversions allow will be subject to “endless” reconstitution as currency goods and their circuits change”

So, crises transform the social worth<sup>10</sup> and worth of people, which is “dialectically tied to how people organize themselves in their aim to sustain life and possibly produce a good life” (Narotzky and Benier, 2014, S10). The *cartoneros* produced value in a double sense: on the one hand, seeking to configure their activity as a legitimate way of earning a living. On the other, showing that garbage -transformed into merchandise- has value.

The new circuit made it possible to normalize a previously embarrassing activity. This led to a stabilization of people on the activity, a way of naturalizing precariousness. Or, put another way, it has constituted the circuit. Nevertheless, shame and frames of reference for post-crisis have not been born in the crisis.

During my first years of fieldwork, shame and the attempt to get out of the activity -to “get a job” like the one they had before collecting- shaped the recycling market differently. Many of the *cartoneros*, for example, thought that the activity they were carrying out was merely circumstantial. For this reason, they decided not to invest in making carts and preferred to rent them to depositors (intermediaries between big industry and collectors). Moreover, the rent often implied the obligation to sell what was collected to the cart’s owner. Thus, a relationship of asymmetric reciprocity was generated between the actors that produced economic ties.

Trying to adapt the behaviors to a foreign territory also implied the regulation of the activity. In order not to be persecuted and to build certain predictability with the neighbors, the *cartoneros* tried to behave in a way they considered correct: not insulting, leaving clean after collecting, and not drinking alcohol. Besides, several times I heard collectors say that being cordial or showing signs of being a good person and of being a “hard worker” could make the “neighbors” give them “jobs.” Thus, the behaviors also configure reciprocity relations and exchange between the different actors. But, as in the case of normalization, these “correct behaviors” -paradoxically- make the *cartoneros* better *cartoneros* and contribute to establishing them in the activity.<sup>11</sup>

## New differentiations and ways of being on the street

The post-2001 crisis growth of people collecting on the streets drew the attention of social scientists. They (we) looked for new categories to understand what was happening. This look obstructed other explanations regarding the *cirujeo* beyond its “novelty.”

As I developed a reading since and from the crisis illuminates the collectors’ repositioning (a construction of the *self*) as valuable and worthy subjects. The context of the crisis in which new forms of resistance arose. Organizational experiences around work were resignified. The new constitution of this relationship between environment and *cirujeo* allowed, not without problems, to install the collection issue not as *cirujas* but as *cartoneros*. Thus, for example, in my fieldwork, I could appreciate how the collectors were learning an environmental language and acting based on it.

The crisis allowed Juan to transform his past and include his activity within the *trabajo digno* (*decent work*) notion. Given the lack of employment, recovering objects from garbage to survive appears as a legitimate option within the possibilities.

During my fieldwork, I often heard phrases such as “I am working. I am not stealing” or “here we go out to work. Instead of begging or stealing, we work”.

<sup>10</sup> “Social worth is how a society values people: the value of people, but also the value obtained through people and the value invested and accumulated in people. This perspective is informed both by anthropological exchange theory, which links the accumulation of value to personal worth, and by a reconfiguration of the labor theory of value, which envisions people as the origin of all value incorporated in commodities” (Narotzky and Benier, 2014, S10).

<sup>11</sup> This idea was developed in Perelman (2011b).



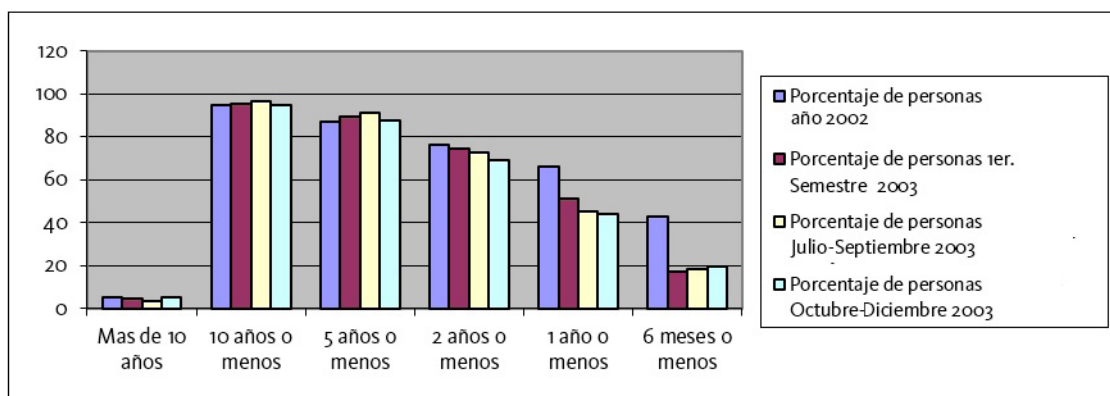
I also understood how the organized cartoneros began to discuss the “value” of the waste and their activity in this process. They not only questioned the “business” after or of the garbage but also sought to be recognized as part of a system that cost municipalities a large amount of its budget. This process contributed to the relationship between work and informal gatherings.

Thus, for many *cartoneros* who had been carrying out the activity before the crisis, *cirujeo* was a way of living (Millar, 2018). For others, it was produced as a way of making a living (Fernández Álvarez and Perelman, 2020; Narotzky and Besnier, 2014) as part of the crises and the normalizations that they allowed. For these groups, the forms of living - how people construct legitimate ways of being in the world, the actions they consider legitimate, and building their frames of reference for action- were different.

The agency of the actors, the ability to rethink their life based on the crises, the grammar around what is legitimate in a changing context, and the circuit of commerce around garbage allow tensioning of the visions that propose that people that live with/ on garbage are “residual humans” (Bauman, 2005). Centering on agency allows going beyond the studies that focus on the lack of work. According to these visions, certain people seem to be discarded from society. The perverse effects of capitalism have been so widely analyzed, and this is not the place to develop them here. Also, the precariousness process that has been imposed in recent decades. Of course, the effects of precariousness are not the same in all countries or social groups.

Graeber’s (2018) “Bullshit Jobs” allows thinking other processes. He distinguished between “bullshit Jobs” and “shits Jobs.” For Graber, the central question is how people themselves understand the activities they made and if their job is or is not useless. Bullshit Jobs are not mere low-income jobs or -necessarily- socially frowned upon. Moreover, they tend to be jobs performed by medium or upper-middle sectors. Shit Jobs, on the other hand, are low-valued jobs. Unvalued social jobs are not only part of marginal economic sectors. Furthermore, much of what could be called Jobs shit is worth billions of dollars. The division is not economic but moral.

A look beyond the crisis allows relativizing the subjectivizing generalization of the “bullshit Jobs” and the objectification of the “Shits Jobs.” And above all, this limit is not only social but can also be questioned and transformed. A significant differentiation was the one that was raised between *structural cirujas* (the ones that have always been) and new *cartoneros* (the ones that “fall” with the crisis), a difference that reproduced -in some way- the notions of structural poverty and new poverty developed in the 1990s.



Identifications are relational processes that change. Collective experiences gradually settle in bodies and groups. Thus, within the framework of the “crisis” was the creation of this differentiation between two social groups. The *structural cirujas* did not precede the *new cartoneros*, but both actors were built into the interaction. The differentiation is made from temporal-spatial experiences and relationships with the garbage, also expressed in the moral assessment of how to make a living.

The new configuration allowed *structural cirujas* to construct themselves as the legitimate cartoneros, the experts. “Now anyone *cirujea*,”; “We are the real *cirujas*, not like those of today who don’t know anything”; “Being a *ciruja* is a source of pride” were phrases I heard from collectors who had been working before the crisis.



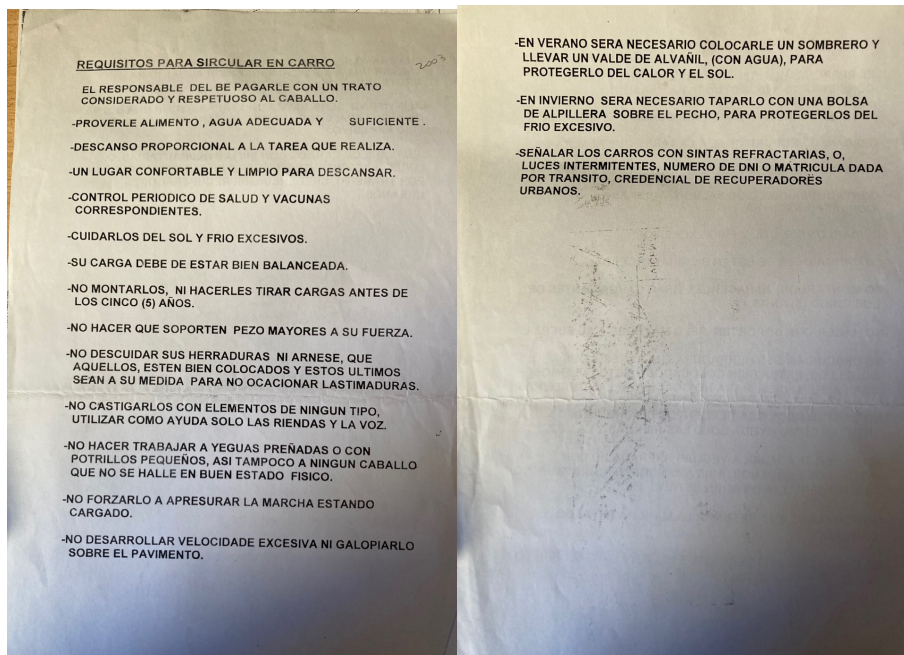
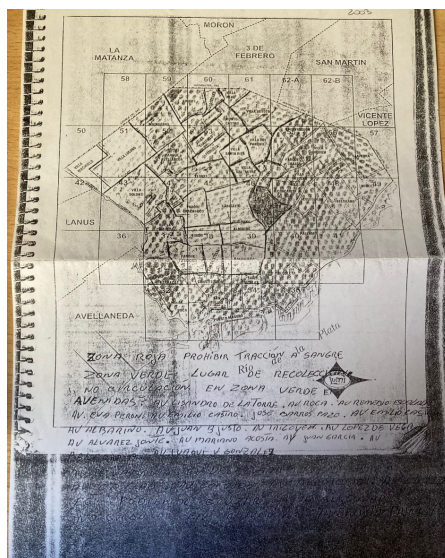
On the other hand, the crisis led the *new cartoneros* to “fall” and feel shame first. Then they could reconstruct the *self* from the *dignity of work* (as an abstract force idea) and form the environmental discourse. Work as an abstract idea and a public legitimate grammatic is related to Argentinean history, where the primary way of earning a living was from the labor market. Many of my interlocutors had had a trajectory linked to the labor market (whether formal or informal). As in the case of Felipe, they continued to think of it as the legitimate way of making a living. But, the reconfiguration of the collection based on moral revaluation began to question the vision of *cirujeo* as a shitty job, both in the past and present.

The massive appearance of collectors on the streets also caused the public notoriety of another group, the *carreros*. These collectors, who collected materials with horse-drawn carts, were not new. Furthermore, they had been the classic characters of collecting in Buenos Aires (Paiva, 2008), and until well into the 1990s, it was a prohibited but permitted activity (Perelman, 2017). However, this massiveness and new discourses (environmental and animal protection) implied rapid persecution. As blood traction was prohibited, the multiplication of the collectors generated a strong reaction against the *carreros*. The “animal rights” groups were central actors in this process. The “confiscations” of the horses began under the argument of animal protection.

Within this framework, the *carreros* began to meet to define actions to follow. The meetings produced recognition and transformed them into a group. Meetings are spaces for sociability (De L’Estoile, 2015) and are not just spaces for decision-making. They are “an essential element in the construction of the social universe, as they create a space of sociability that contributes to the consolidation of networks of relationships that cross the formal structure of organizations, establishing some of the parameters and mechanisms for disputes over power within these organizations, have a dimension of ritualized construction of collective symbols and put

into action multiple conceptions or representations related to the nature of workers' organizations and the role of their leaders and members, as well as the nature of the category that these organizations propose to represent" (Comerford, 1999: 46).

In those meetings, the *carreros* discussed what to do. Between 2002 and 2003, I participated in several meetings in which they sought to bring a map of permitted circulation zones to the legislature. They colored in a photocopy different areas. These areas were where there should be free circulation for carts - all on the city's edge. They wanted to take this map to the legislators as they thought they could get a collection space. We held dozens of meetings, some more and others less formal, to define, discuss, and establish what the zones should be and what the "behaviors" of the collectors should be. "Now they persecute us because there are thousands of assholes who leave everything dirty, who make noise, who don't understand the codes," they said. A form of us (*carreros*) and others (the *new cartoneros*) was also delimited in these talks. And they sought to show themselves as knowledgeable about the needs of animals.



In other meetings, they discussed what to do with the confiscation of the horses. Many of them talk of the horse as part of their family. The horse, thus, was constitutive of being *carrero* beyond a “working tool.” Using the horse -instead of the cart- was a central theme but not the only one. The care of animals appeared as the main moral argument of his work. One afternoon a group of *carreros* asked me and a lawyer if we could try to enter the property where the confiscated horses were. The *carreros* were concerned about the situation of their horses, as they had no information about them. Many referred to the relationship they had with their horses. They accepted that some did not care for them, but they said they were few. The relationship with horses also produced a gap within the *carreros*. As in the case of the *cartoneros*, it created a differentiation between the legitimated ones and the new *carreros*.

These were waiting times. While we waited for the horses and to be attended by the legislators, the *carreros* became *carreros*. Information was circulating. Differentiations were being built. In the moments in which something is expected to happen, relationships are activated for it to happen (Cavalcanti, 2013). And above all, ways of framing past and future actions are generated (Perelman, 2017).

### Men, women, and crises

The new circuit of commerce had new gender relations. If crises are moments in which the frames of reference are disrupted, gender relations and the construction of masculinity and femininity also change.

According to my interlocutors, until 2001, the number of women collecting - at least in garbage dumps and on the streets - was very low. “Now it’s full of women,” Ramiro, an old collector, told me one afternoon. “It was not like this in the past. Then, we were all male.” The *Quema* was eminently masculine, and manhood was produced from violence: “It was not a place for women. Drinking wine all night, fights, weapons. Imagine,” said Juan.

In the *Quema*, the violence was part of the configuration and part of the constitutive trade circuit of the informal collection (Perelman, 2020). Twenty-five years later, many women were collecting. Between 2002 and 2003, the City of Buenos Aires Government surveyed 8,153 collectors.<sup>12</sup> Of them, 71.1% were men, and 28.9 women. During the following years, women continue entering the activity.

Women dedicated to the gathering were not unknown or a “novelty” (Gorban, 2011). As I developed elsewhere (Perelman, 2011a), *cirujear* cannot be considered a total break in the trajectories of many collectors. In many of my interlocutors, there had been a small structural distance -using the terms of Evans-Prichard (1987)- about residues. Many *cartoneros* that began to “come” to Buenos Aires lived in areas close to the garbage dumps and CEAMSE (like José León Suárez). Many men had combined *cirujeo* with other activities, especially as children. The same happened with women (Gorban, 2011).

Many women started collecting before men at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. I met Daniel and Noemí at a station in the Buenos Aires suburbs in 2003 while they were waiting for the train to take them to the capital. In the 1990s, Noemí was responsible for “the house and the children.” Daniel worked in a service company as a driver on different public passenger transport lines until 1999, when he lost his job. So, Daniel began to make “changes” (under construction, freight, repair) until these options disappeared. The couple could no longer maintain their home, so they went to live in a settlement built on an old garbage dump in the Buenos Aires suburbs near CEAMSE. With no income, Noemí and a neighbor began to ask for food in restaurants, bakeries, and stores in the area first and in the City of Buenos Aires later.

<sup>12</sup> Registro de Recuperadores Urbanos, Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Secretaría de Hacienda y Finanzas, Dirección de Estadísticas y Censos, diciembre de 2003.

From there, they gradually moved on to *cirujear*: they received not only food but also used clothing, cardboard, and other discarded materials that they could later sell or fix for personal use. It took Daniel a few months to decide to “start.” He was ashamed that his neighbors would see him, and he was ashamed that he, the breadwinner of the family, needed to be rummaging through bags to find food, medicine, and materials to sell. But he was more ashamed that now the family income came from his wife.

For many of my male interlocutors, “starting” or “taking the plunge” was a decision made after that of their wives. Over time this decision allowed them to reconstruct their masculinity. As Gorban (2011: 168) has pointed out, “In a context in which women ‘go out with the cart’ [salir con la carreta] equally as men, differential criteria for valuing the same activity are established.” Although women’s activity was central to maintaining a familiar economy, it was seen as “help.” One of the effects of the crisis was, then, the recognition of women as *cartoneras* workers and not as mere helpers.

The differential valorization of the activity is also expressed in the ability to be in the public space. In the streets, violence is not a public expression of prestige. Even when violence has been part of how conflicts between collectors were resolved, it was not public. Moreover, violence is not part of correct behavior in the streets. Instead, violence is exercised and works as a moral argument around the uses of public space. Thus, if, during the 1970s, violence seemed to be part of the practices of the cartoneros, an inverse process occurred on the street. For my male interlocutors, the *cartoneras* can be subject to violence -primarily physical. “The street is not a place for women. They have to be in the street all day with people. It’s dangerous. Anything can happen to them. There are drunk people.” “You must know about the street; it is not for everyone. Women can suffer violence, from the police, from other kinds. It is not for women to work in the street.”

For male *cartoneros*, the street is a masculine space, as opposed to the domestic sphere and the neighborhood, which is the security space. The anonymous city appears, discursively, as a place of danger for women, an area beyond the control of men.

*Caring for women* (that is, control over them) was, for my male interlocutors, a central dimension of masculinity. *Cuidado* (care) was a polysemic notion. The women take care of “the pot”; the women take care of the children and the husbands. Women take care of their autonomy. Yet, at the same time, men dispute that autonomy and care. In everyday comments, I heard men refer to women’s attitudes on the street. “She went out to *cartonear* with makeup,” Raúl told me. “She went out, and she stayed hanging around all day. They have to talk to concierges. You know how this works!” stated Ramiro. Men reconstruct their masculinity based on strength (ability to carry) and caring for their women on the street.

Also, there has been a new division of labor. While men looked for the waste, women rang house bells or entered businesses to “ask” or beg. “Asking” (*pedir*) is configured as the opposite of working.

For most of my male interlocutors, physical strength is necessary for collecting. “A cart is many, many kilos. This is not for women.” Even in the work cooperatives, the place given to women referred to the site’s cleanliness to the separation, but never to jobs that required physical strength that men carried out. In 2007, I attended a meeting between cooperative members that was held before the one that would later be held with City Government personnel. In it, they drew up a draft of the minute that they would later sign to establish the members’ positions in the plant. The distribution was made according to previous experiences (work, friendship, and affinity), social hierarchies, and gender relations.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> I reproduce the minute draft correcting spelling errors and anonymizing names.

On July 2 [2007], the board of directors and part of the associates of the XX cooperative met at the XXX headquarters. To deal with the following order of business. Construction of the new green center located in the XX built by NITIDA. Having discussed with each associate the activity to be administered by each.

MAN (president of the cooperative): control.

WOMAN: plant control.

MAN: general tasks.

MAN: Control of exits and entrances of vehicles.

WOMAN: cook.

WOMAN: kitchen helper.

WOMAN: Kitchen helper.

WOMAN: Plastic separation.

OLDER MAN: Plastic separation.

MAN: General maintenance.

MAN: separation.

MAN: loading and unloading.

MAN: Separator.

MAN: Presser.

MAN: Presser.

MAN: Loader.

MAN: Loader.

MAN: Loader.

MAN: Loader.

WOMAN: Cleaning.

WOMAN: Cleaning

WOMAN: Administration.

Without having more topics to deal with, being 12:30 hours, today's minutes close.

President: MAN.

Prosecretary: WOMAN WIFE OF THE PRESIDENT.

More generally, in the city of Buenos Aires, the gender division is constructed by the local Government. For example, the "Environmental Promoters" program is performed by women (Puricelli, 2017) who go home by home trying to make residents aware of the environmental importance of separating waste. In addition, women are supposed to be more trustworthy than men for neighbors (Perelman and Puricelli, 2019). The entry of women into the activity, the construction of collection as an environmental practice, and a more formalized work broadened the notion of what being a collector means. Being cartonera does not only or always imply working with garbage.

## Economy(s), moral values, and ways of living in times of crises

From what I have raised in this text, I would like to finish this article by rethinking some questions about “the recycling economy” post-crisis in Argentina.

First, it is necessary to think about the temporalities of social processes. As in 2001, there are critical moments in which there is consensus about being in crisis.

Crises can be considered ruptures and revealing moments of social processes (Sahlins, 1972). Therefore, it is necessary to (re)think about the temporalities of the explanations of crises and think about what crises reveal for whom (Barrios, 2017) and how different forms of uncertainties are produced (de L’Estoile, 2014). This for whom refers to the researchers as the actors themselves. The ruptures implied by this idea of crisis are not the same for all people, nor are they processed in the same way. The emerging processes for *carreros*, the “structural” *cirujas*, and the new cartoneros were different as I developed. To understand diversity, thinking behind and beyond the crisis is necessary.

*Cartonear*, *cirujear* as a legitimate way of making a living must be understood from the changes in the “world of work” and the “world of collection.”

A look beyond the crisis (“backward”) also allows an understanding of informal collection beyond its exceptionality, beyond a disruptive moment or stage (crisis, job loss), and to understand the nuances and forms of survival that have existed in Argentina. For many informal collectors was not a diversion from a way of living. And given the moral constructions around what is a dignified life and a dignified way of earning a living, it is necessary to focus on how people understand dignified life since moral assessments are constitutive of survival practices.

From here, it is possible to understand the differences around informal collection as something generalizable. For example, in Rio de Janeiro, the trajectories and access to the labor market of collectors have been different (Lima, 2021), which allows us to understand the activity as a way of life (Millar, 2018). Or how high-profit collectors in Indonesia try to go unnoticed, and companies that produce or use pellets from recycled plastics choose strategic invisibility for their activities (Colombijn, 2020).

There are different “recycling markets” with different aesthetics, such as the urban organic waste composting initiatives (Arisi and Soares, 2020), which are also based on discourses with “crisis” as a backdrop: it is the “conscious” of middle sectors that propose political forms of reuse.

This shows that in economies of recycling circulate different moralities and valuations that are the product of the crisis, but that do not end there. But this aestheticization as a way of producing value - which has much to do with aestheticization as a political form (Perelman, 2022b) - also occurs within the same circuit.

*Cirujeo* as dignified work was established and made possible by the inscription of the collection in the grammar of work and in a new circuit of commerce where the “environment” had a central place. This was not just an instrumental use of existing grammar but a construction produced from struggles to impose meanings. Studies on cartoneros have marked the importance of the work on recovering garbage that can become a material (Carenzo, 2011) or an economic input (Jurado and Schamber, 2020).

However, the relationship between the environment and recycling cannot be considered part of a single regime of value since different circuits around garbage coexist. Other ways of thinking about the circulation of objects through different spheres of social and economic valuation coexist today in Buenos Aires.

Following things and people allows us to understand the intertwined world that constitutes the economic circuit of recycling which, taking up Zelizer’s proposal, is constituted not only by economic practices but also by moralities, forms of exchange, and aesthetics. Furthermore, these ways of being in space, feeling, and thinking about gender relations have an economic component insofar as they structure how it is collected, bought, and sold.

If the circular economy appears as a collective political (and even aesthetic) project about how objects should circulate, a look from the point of collecting allows us to show not only that constitution but also those frameworks of possibilities in which the practices are endowed of senses. The cartoneros are part of a world where thousands of people reuse (re-circulate) things differently. The plurality of practices in which objects and people pass produce moral, legal, political, and value transformations. This is what the waste recovery circuit is made of.

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# “They don’t stop and analyse that what we’re recycling is coming from their homes” Pathways of waste and autonomous waste-pickers in Santos- São Paulo, Brazil

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## Abstract

Among the many socio-environmental issues that Brazilian cities face, one of the most pressing is the excess of waste. This article relates two poles of this problem: 1) the pathways travelled by waste in the city of Santos, in the state of São Paulo, as apprehended from institutional mapping, documentary research and interviews with those responsible for waste management in the city; (2) the vulnerability of autonomous waste-pickers from the stilt-favela of Dique da Vila Gilda. By listening and wayfaring observation, the article reports on how these subjects perceive and deal with waste and those who discard it, what difficulties they face and how they understand nature and technology. By observing them in movement we conclude that initiatives for dealing with the excess of waste must include these agents of socio-environmental protection in decision-making processes and the administration of public policies.

**Key words:** Waste-pickers; Waste; Socio-environmentalism; Santos hinterlands; Recycling.

“Eles não param pra analisar que isso que a gente tá reciclando tá vindo da casa deles”

## Caminhos dos resíduos e catadores autônomos em Santos-SP, Brasil

### Resumo

O excesso de resíduos é um dos mais graves problemas socioambientais que impactam as cidades brasileiras. Este artigo relaciona duas pontas dessa problemática: 1) as trajetórias dos resíduos na cidade de Santos-SP por meio de mapeamento institucional, pesquisa documental e entrevistas com os responsáveis pela gestão de resíduos na cidade; 2) A vulnerabilidade em que se encontram os catadores autônomos da região da favela de palafitas do Dique da Vila Gilda. O objetivo é relatar, por meio da escuta e observação caminhante, o universo deles para analisar como esses sujeitos percebem e lidam com os resíduos e com quem os descarta, quais dificuldades enfrentam e como compreendem a natureza e a tecnologia. A observação em movimento com eles permitiu concluir que iniciativas para o enfrentamento do excesso de resíduos passa pela inclusão efetiva desses agentes de proteção socioambiental nos processos decisórios e de gestão de políticas públicas.

**Palavras-chave:** Catadores; Resíduos; Socioambientalismo; Baixada Santista; Reciclagem.

# “They don’t stop and analyse that what we’re recycling is coming from their homes”

## Pathways of waste and autonomous waste-pickers in Santos- São Paulo, Brazil

*Josefina Tranquilin-Silva; Tereza Carvalho; Maria Golobovante; Akio Goya*

### **Motivations and methodological choices**

This article harks back to 2016, when one of the authors started a community communication research and outreach project<sup>1</sup> in Dique da Vila Gilda (Santos-São Paulo)<sup>2</sup>, Brazil’s largest favela on stilts (Fabiano and Muniz, 2010: 233). In 2019 the opportunity arose to develop new research on the increasing presence of autonomous solid waste-pickers in the region. The precarious nature of this erratic work inspired the creation of an interdisciplinary group involving an anthropologist, a communicologist and two computer engineers, all educators<sup>3</sup>, who arranged the project with the aim of describing, mapping and reflecting on the daily dimensions experienced by these waste-pickers. Through the method of careful listening and the wayfaring observation of the universe of the autonomous waste-pickers, we sought to analyze how these individuals perceive and deal with waste and those who dispose of it, what difficulties they face, and how they understand nature and technology.

Henceforth, this interdisciplinary group takes charge of this article, as we hope that this reflection can, in some way, contribute to the development of public policies in the future, which might somehow transform the environmental and social reality of the waste-pickers.

Among the many contemporary global socio-environmental problems, the exponential production of waste is surely one of the most serious. There is no Planet B, which leads us to ask: how might humanity avoid its own despotic collapse beneath a mountain of rubbish? While many initiatives exist, the fact is that this question cannot be answered only through technical solutions such as those proposed in the global macro-space. It needs to be urgently tackled as a systemic issue.

To this end, we first track the institutional mapping of waste in Santos, in the state of São Paulo. We make use of both personal observation and documentary research with official sources, such as those in municipal departments and agencies: Secretaria de Serviços Públicos (Seserp, The Department of Public Services),

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1 The project was an initiative of the research and extension group Mediatel - Mediações Telemáticas (Telematic Mediations) of the Faculty of Communication of the Pontícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, in partnership with the Arte no Dique Institute, creator of the Web Radio Palafita, a form of mass community communication that sought to generate popular emancipation through the production, dissemination and reception of content of local interest. The project extended from 2016 to 2019.

2 O Dique da Vila Gilda is a peripheral área in the Rádio Clube district of the city of Santos, located in the coast of the state of São Paulo, where, according to census data, some thirteen thousand people live on stilts and precarious housing units.

3 The authors conceived of this research in order to have contact with the waste-pickers and identify what technological needs they identified that could help them improve their income in the daily action of *catação* (sorting). The idea was to prototype and test these technologies and present the results of this application. However, this proved impossible because of the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020-2021, when the University of São Paulo, the project’s headquarters, was closed and no in-person activities were allowed. The unfeasibility of this technological prototyping, however, did not prevent us from carrying out field research, and building, by means of an interdisciplinary methodology and without any kind of financial support, the unprecedented results that we present in this article.

Secretaria Municipal de Meio Ambiente (Semam, Municipal Department for the Environment) and Progresso e Desenvolvimento de Santos (Prodesan S/A, Progress and Development in Santos), in the Terracom company and in social organizations (Concidadania, Sem Fronteiras, Santos Lixo Zero, Pimp My Carroça, Settaport, Instituto GEA). We also made use of interviews with agents of these organizations, all held online or by telephone and based on a preconceived script, in order to understand the specificities of the Santos context in the area of the Dique da Vila Gilda, in the Rádio Clube neighborhood.

Despite a number of important studies of waste and waste-pickers in Brazil (Demajorovic and Lima, 2013; De Paula, 2006; Guerra, 2018; Gonçalves-Dias, Sakurai and Ziglio, 2021; Lima, 2021; Rial, 2016 e *Iluminuras*, 2020 v. 21 n° 55), most focus on syndicated waste-pickers. There are few studies of autonomous and non-syndicated waste-pickers, who thus remains invisible in research.

Waste pickers are usually welded to the daily life of our city streets: they become invisible to us because they are undesirable, revealing a vulnerability that demands the attention of society. Most of them live on the streets, surviving in a socially and culturally erratic way. These are our research subjects. To choose our participants, we selected ten waste-pickers who are self-employed and commute or live in the area of the Dique da Vila Gilda and the Rádio Clube neighborhood. We sought to understand how they experience that chaotic environment, how they perceive waste, nature, and technology.

Knowledge acquired in previous research projects had taught us that waste-pickers would only participate as research subjects if we approached them during *catação* (sorting) and walked with them, since they had already told us that they would not stop to be interviewed. This condition was directly linked to the fact that their survival depends on the speed with which they can sort and gather waste: “I can’t stop ma’am, I have to sort” (F.B. Jesus) and “you’re going to record and film me, I can’t, no” (E. dos Santos). Following discussion involving the research team, we decided to adopt the method of “wayfaring observation” (Careri, 2013: 32), wherein the method of walking emerges as “a play on space, where landscape is constructed in alignment with the historical moment to which this walking is related”, in this case it was a triadic game between us, them (waste-pickers) and the environment (space), during the act of sorting – or *catação*, *catar*, ‘to sort’ + *ação*, ‘action’ – a *sorting action*.

Thus, we created a brief script of questions and themes that could flow during our joint wayfaring, divided into three small blocks. In the first, we identified the person - name, age, level of education, place where they lived, and origin, in addition to two specific questions: the places where they sorted waste and whether they preferred to pick waste at certain sites. This first block immediately made it possible to take notice of their accents and ways of speaking, to better understand their verbal and gestural encodings. It is important to say that they hardly looked at us, their eyes were always focused and attentive to the waste, which mattered much more than we did. In the second block of questions, focused on their daily work: what opinions did they have about why people discard what they do, and what would be important initiatives for the improvement of their working conditions and income generation. In the final block we turned to questions about what they understood by nature and technology. This is how we started to accompany them in their activities and, when they stopped at a certain bin to select what they would take away, we were able to more effectively engage the questions and themes of our script. This phase of the research lasted from November 2020 to June 2021.

Along with our script, the wayfaring observation methodology was characterized by careful listening, by attention to signs during sorting: the instant and attentive gaze, tactile impressions, the gesture of trained hands as they touch, feel and decide what should go into their bag or cart (many of them taken from supermarkets). The dexterity and speed of sorting is noticeable to the sharp perception of waste-pickers, who identify, select and quickly evaluate the possible price of what is gathered.



## Pathways of Waste in Santos

We start from the presupposition that there are two aspects to the socio-environmental issue that are privileged in debates and actions. The first is what we call *macro-global space* and the other the *organic space*. The macro-global space is mainly represented by environmental conferences promoted by the United Nations (UN) and global articulations between governments, large corporations and prominent civil society agents. Organic spaces are linked to territories at the micro-social level and can be informal, resilient, peripheral, and engendered by people in individual or collective acts aiming for a more balanced environment. These two spaces are not fixed constructs; no rigid boundary separates them. Instead, they are in dialogue, mutually influencing each other and their approximations or separations depend on the interests of agents that are associated with one space or the other during encounters and negotiations.

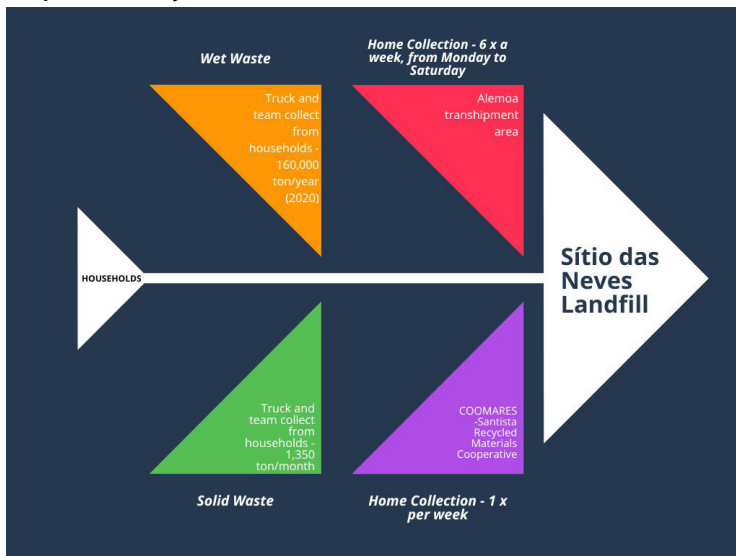
We have thus mapped the pathways of solid waste in Santos in the aim of understanding whether the actions put into effect contemplated only technical solutions, or if they included other solutions.

In the Santos municipality, two departments are responsible for waste management services: the Secretaria de Serviços Públicos (Seserp) and the Secretaria Municipal de Meio Ambiente (Semam), as is one mixed capital company, Progresso e Desenvolvimento de Santos (Prodesan S/A). Sesarp and Prodesan are responsible for collecting solid waste from urban residences or similar addresses, and collecting septic waste. They outsource these services to Terracom, a private company hired to collect, treat and transport humid and dry waste from residences to their final destination<sup>4</sup>.

Recyclable waste is collected by the Departamento de Apoio à Limpeza Pública (DEAP) and the Prodesan, who carry out this service on behalf of the Secretaria de Meio Ambiente (Semam). Information we obtained indicate that, at present, Prodesan hires lorries from two private companies that carry out this service (the names of these companies was not informed). Along with this service, DEAP/Prodesan oversees the services carried out by Terracom on behalf of Seserp, and provides consultancy to that department in what concerns public and technical policies for cleaning public spaces.

In what pertains to selective collecting, Semam manages the collection of recyclable waste via a contract with Prodesan. The pathways of waste in Santos can be presented as in Graph 1.

Graph 1 – Pathways of Waste in Santos



Source: Authors' elaboration

4 The classification of waste was determined by the National Policy of Solid Waste (Law 12.305/2010)

If we consider only domestic waste, Santos has had regular and selective waste collecting since 1991. The journey, which begins in daily collecting at peoples' homes and ends at the Sítio das Neves landfill, is long and includes a critical stopover at the Alemoa over area. According to information provided by Seserp, this is where we find a road scale (provided and operated by Terracom in partnership with Prodesan) where all garbage vehicles that collect waste through this contract are weighed. There is also the transference of waste from lorries to the trains that transport overflow waste to the licensed landfill of Sítio das Neves (operated by the Terreste Company, a part of the Terracom group), located on the continental part of Santos, close to the Cônego Domênico Rangoni Highway (also known as the Cubatão-Guarujá Highway). Each train transports on average the volume of four lorries that carry compacted waste. Every month, some 600 train trips traverse the 60km two-way journey from Alemoa to Sítio das Neves.

It is also at Alemoa that Comares is situated, next to the Prodesan cement plant, where solid waste is sorted for treatment by the Cooperative that sells waste and transfers the profits to the cooperative members. The residue and dejects and debris are transported to Sítio das Neves (Figure 1).

**Figure 1** – Aerial view of the Overflow area (in red) and Comares (in yellow)



Source: Google Maps

Humid and solid waste follow the same path right until solid waste reaches Comares. In 2016, the Santos mayor's office, by way of the Environment Department (Semam), signed a ten-year agreement with Comares, which operates in the triage plant in Alemoa. The cooperative has existed since 2003, and is composed of some 45 members. According to Odete Cunha dos Santos, the founder and former coordinator, who passed away in 2021, the cooperative's aim has always been to increase productivity, reducing the index of waste which, in 2016, was at about 40%. Comares denied us access to contemporary figures, so we have no way of knowing at what percentage this is today<sup>5</sup>. This is true for aerial surveys of the Alemoa Overflow. Nonetheless, we went to the gate of the cooperative and took the pictures featured here as Figures 2 and 3.

<sup>5</sup> Our contact at Semam claimed that visits had been suspended due to the pandemic. This response was sent to us in March of 2021, after all of the activities of the municipality had already reverted become to in-person activities.

**Figures 2 and 3** – Comares entry gate and partial view of its front courtyard in the Vereador Alfredo Neves Avenue



Source: Author's ophoto.

The partnership between Comares and the Mayor's Office sought to incorporate waste-pickers' cooperatives in the administration of the municipal selective collecting system, thus fulfilling one of the aims set out in the National Policy for Solid Waste (Law 12.305/2010), without thereby incorporating policies for autonomous waste-pickers.

A critical factor in this process is that the collection of solid waste up to the Alemoa Overflow area is done by compactor lorries, when cage lorries should be used (standard model in the process of collection of recycled materials). This is because the compaction process makes a good part of the materials unusable and hinders services at Comares. Calculations indicate that, in this way, only 30% of the residues are used. The rest becomes waste that is to be sent to the landfill. Some analysts explain that, this way, the company that will transport the solid waste to the overflow area will be the same company that will transport the waste from there to the landfill and, thus, it can earn two times over for the service.

In contrast to this view, Prodesan, when questioned, stated that at the time the licensing was approved the value for hiring cage lorries was much higher than that for compactor lorries. Semam, in turn, argues that the mayor's office had agreed to make use of cage lorries in the second half of 2022, but that the pandemic prevented this change from happening. The situation had not changed by November 2022.

According to data provided by Semam, Table 1 presents the figures for the production and selective collection of waste:

**Table 1** – Volume of waste and residue in the last 5 years

YEAR	Humid Solid Waste	Residue
2017	170.194 tons	2.087 tons
2018*	164.592 tons	3.164 tons
2019*	162.600 tons	2.442 tons
2020*	160.407 tons	4.681 tons

Source: Semam and Seserp agents

After a lengthy process of consulting data and carrying out interviews with members of the public service and of companies and NGOs, it is clear that the problem of waste is complex and systemic. However, the compartmentalized way in which it is administered by officials splits services up between different departments (Semam and Seserp), involving the mixed capital company Prodesan and the private company Terracom, as well as outsourced services, all of which makes it not only difficult to understand the process, but, above all, to police it.

This fragmentation is made evident by the proliferation of service contracts for collecting waste. A further point that became clear during the interviews is the absence of waste-pickers from the whole process of collecting and treating waste, as the actions of Comares, with its 45 waste-pickers, is far too small a fraction of the number of waste-pickers and cooperatives in the municipality. Decisions regarding waste in Santos are therefore purely technical, and everything leads us to conclude that the municipal authorities envisage the environmental issue as a cost rather than an investment.

### Creation and Growth of Dique da Vila Gilda

The Northwestern Zone of the city of Santos is considered to be the least privileged area of the city. Dique da Vila Gilda is located in its southern extreme. As it is an environmental protection zone, including a stretch of mangrove, it was never meant to have been urbanized, but is today occupied by vulnerable families without access to suitable homes. When stilts began to be erected on the mangrove mud floor, using material that had been irregularly discarded, precarious hygiene conditions and the disorder of urban occupation disseminated disease and fostered environmental destruction.

The rise and growth of Dique da Vila are marked by three moments that had significant socio-environmental impact (Fabiano e Muniz, 2010). The first, in the 1950s, was caused by the construction of a dike (*dique*) and drainage canals by the extinct Departamento Nacional de Obras de Saneamento (DNOS, National Department of Sanitation Works), resulting in a large hydraulic landfill across the extent of the margins of the Rio dos Bugres, which made the first occupations possible. Starting in 1960, stilt houses (mostly made of plywood) began to expand toward the middle of the river. Since they lacked plumbing, inhabitants began to dispose of their domestic waste directly into the Rio dos Burges.

Many of these improvised residences were constructed by immigrants from the Brazilian Northeast, particularly from the state of Sergipe, who went in search of work in the Presidente Bernardes Refinery, in Cubatão, and in the construction of the Anchieta and Imigrantes highways. The third factor was the Sambaíatuba Municipal Garbage Dump, created in 1965, which occupies a large part of the banks of the river, next to the city of São Vicente. For over 30 years this was the only waste dump in the São Vicente municipality, receiving some 4000 tons of waste every day. This “mountain of trash” lacked any sort of system for treating manure, or covering or barrier for preventing the tide from taking garbage into the river.

### Dique da Vila Gilda: An Urban Anomaly?

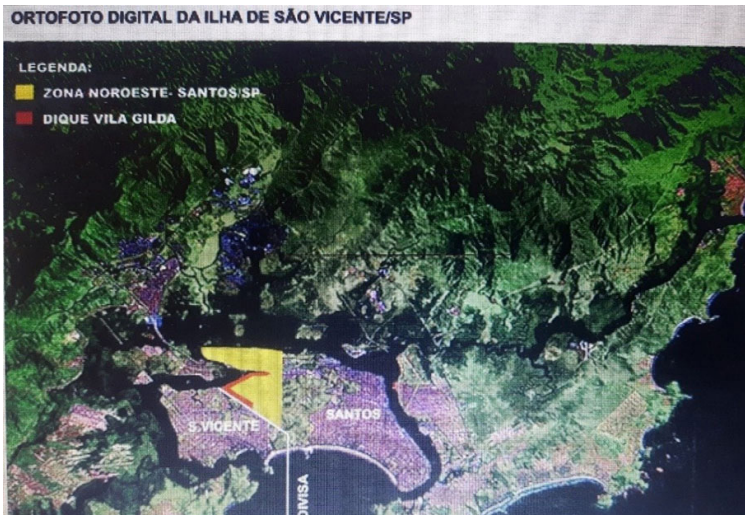
**Figure 4** – Aerial view of Dique da Vila Gilda



Source: Lambauer, Stepan (s/d)

The historical sketch above complements our *in loco* wayfaring observation of the territory. Dique da Vila is a district of the Rádio Clube neighborhood (Figure 4), in the Northwest Zone of Santos (Figure 5), which gathers a number of micro-urban agglomerations which residents informally call Caminho São José, Caminho São Sebastião, Caminho da Capela, Caminho da Divisa, Caminho da União, Brigadeiro, Vila Pelé, Mangue Seco, Vila Telma.<sup>6</sup> It is these names that residents recognize as their territories of belonging. Many are not familiar with the name of ‘Vila Gilda’ at all, which is what the area is called in official documents. The local population has different spatial referents. The area displays a high degree of social vulnerability, with a high index of disease caused by a polluted environment.

**Figure 5** – Orthophoto of the location of the habitational nuclei in São Vicente Island



Fonte: Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais (2006)

Dique da Vila Gilda has 13,278 inhabitants. Figure 6 shows the neighborhoods which neighbor the Dique.

**Figure 6** – Zoning map of the Northwest Zone of Santos



Source: Santos Mayor’s Office (2007)

<sup>6</sup> According to our field research, as well as the MPhil Dissertatio by Caio M Fabiano (2008) “Subsídios ao Plano de Regularização Fundiária e Urbanística da Zona Especial de Interesse Social do núcleo habitacional Dique da Vila Gilda, Santos – SP”: [https://www.ipt.br/pos\\_graduacao\\_ipt/solucoes/dissertacoes/292-subsidios\\_ao\\_plano\\_de\\_regularizacao\\_fundiaria\\_e\\_urbanistica\\_da\\_zona\\_especial\\_de\\_interesse\\_social\\_do\\_nucleo\\_habitacional\\_.htm](https://www.ipt.br/pos_graduacao_ipt/solucoes/dissertacoes/292-subsidios_ao_plano_de_regularizacao_fundiaria_e_urbanistica_da_zona_especial_de_interesse_social_do_nucleo_habitacional_.htm). Acesso em: 23 abr. 2020.

There are few places in Dique da Vila with sewage and water services. What we find most are makeshift and clandestine pipes. Bath water and waste are directly thrown into the waters of the mangrove. Both marine creatures and inhabitants are thereby put at risk, since polluted water favors the proliferation of vectors of disease. Furthermore, according to the Companhia de Saneamento Básico do Estado de São Paulo (Sabesp, São Paulo State Sewage and Water Company), only 17% of the houses of Dique da Vila have running water. Figures 7 and 8 illustrate the precarious state of sewage disposal in the favela.

**Figure 7** – An alleyway which residents call ‘Última Ponte’ (Last Bridge), in Dique da Vila



Source: Authors' Photo

**Figura 8** – View of the tributary of the Rio dos Bugres which crosses Dique da Vila Gilda



Source: William R Schopit, Ecofaxina Institute Website (2020)

Nonetheless, residents of Vila Gilda have strong links to the community. When asked if they would rather live somewhere else, many said they would not. From the vantage point of the dysfunctional urbanization of Brazilian cities, favelas and their inhabitants are seen to be illegal, potentially criminal, social parasites, uncivilized, socially and economically excluded, sub-citizens (Souza e Silva, Barbosa, Faustini, 2012: 80).

Yet there is a movement, timidly gestated in the 1990s (as evident in the Rap da Felicidade (Happiness Rap) of Cidinho and Doca: “Eu só quero é ser feliz na favela onde eu nasci” (I just want to be happy in the favela where I was born)), and which gained traction in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: the resignification of how favelas are perceived. This movement included seeing, in the innovative and territorialized cultural output of favelas, a quest for creative, collective, and solidary solutions which might transmute this part of the city into a space of life, instead of the mere territories in which capital and hierarchical power circulate that they have traditionally been imagined to be.

In what pertains to waste, data obtained from Terracom reveals that the Rádio Clube and Vila Gilda regions are served daily by domestic solid waste-collectors via two 19m<sup>3</sup> compactor-lorries, one destined for Vila Gilda and the other for Rádio Clube. Both are sent out during the daytime waste-collection period, which starts at 6:00 am and ends at 2:20 pm, and during nighttime waste-collection, from 6:00 pm to 2:20 am, from Monday to Saturday. The company also informed us that much of what is discarded is non-recyclable, with a greater volume on Mondays. These are the approximate weight for waste collected in the two regions:

# RÁDIO CLUBE – On average 12 tons of collected waste per day (22 to 23 tons on average every Monday, and on other days between 10 and 12 tons).

# DIQUE DA VILA GILDA – On average 2.5 to 3 tons per day.

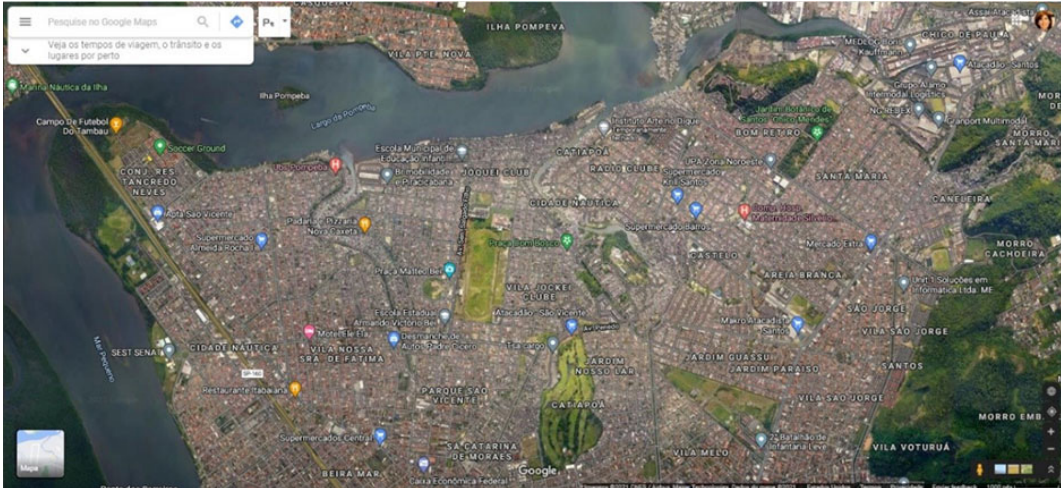
When we asked Seserp if there was any sort of plan for collecting and treating specific types of waste for the Rádio Clube and Dique da Vila Gilda areas, we were told that there was not. They argued that there is no technical justification for differentiating “public” services, and that it would be far too difficult to establish this specificity by contract. The Audit Office and the Attorney General’s Office of the State of São Paulo would be likely to deny in contract in these terms. A further issue is that, for the public service, there is a widespread understanding that the more services they “provide”, the more they hinder public “conscience” and “education”.

Seserp also reported that the Mayor’s Office had been accused of privileging the Beachfront area to the detriment of the Northwest Zone, but that this is a misconception since services are provided homogeneously. According to Seserp, there are many buildings on the waterfront which have their own concierge and janitorial services, while in the Northwest Zone attention to disposal and the sidewalks is different. Seserp’s position is contrary to what the waste-pickers said in the survey we carried out, and, indeed, in what is visible in the photos of the community. The excess of waste and its impact on environmental and social degradation are notorious in the region of Dique da Vila Gilda, impregnated into the very landscape.

The Rádio Clube neighborhood has undergone a process of urban revitalization in the last ten years and has become a lower middle-class neighborhood that is disconnected from the Dique da Vila Gilda in some of its urbanistic aspects. In Rádio Clube, the streets are all paved, as are the lanes, while Dique is characterized by narrow alleys of beaten soil or of wooden planks in those places where the soil is replaced by the tide. Rádio Clube has furthermore a busy commercial area with all the requisite commercial infrastructure and public equipment: schools, polyclinics and brick houses, while in Dique most of the houses are made of wood, there are stilts over the river, even though there is an increasing number of brick constructions in areas that are being filled with waste.

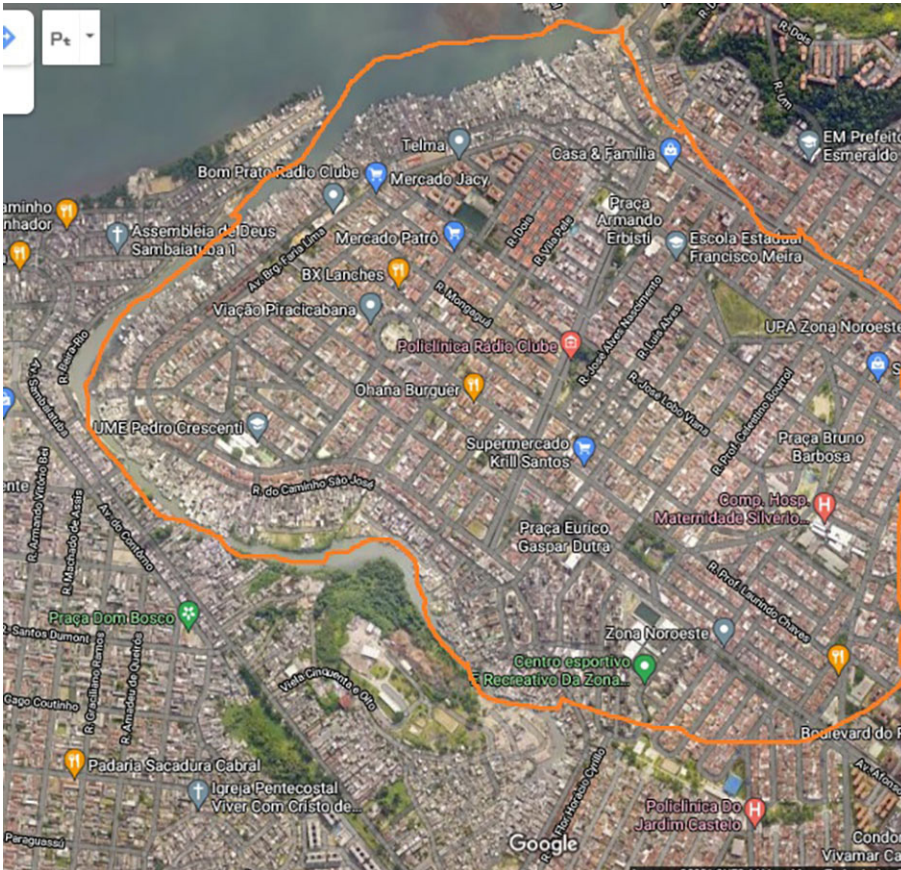
The geographical area where research was carried out is presented in two maps: a general view of the Northwest Zone of Santos (Figure 9) and the area within which research was carried out, circumscribed by the Jovino de Melo and Nossa Senhora de Fátima avenues and by the tributary of the Rio dos Bugres which penetrates the territory, as seen in the area marked in orange in Figure 10.

**Figure 9** – General view of the Northwest Zone of Santos and the neighboring areas of São Vicente, such as the Cidade Náutica and Jockey Club.



Source: Google Earth

**Figure 10** – Map with a zoom of the area of research, delimited by the Jovino de Mello and Nossa Senhora de Fátima avenues, and by the tributary of the Rio dos Burgres which enters into this territory.



Source: Google Earth

By mapping the role of each agent, whether associated with the public or private sectors, or with civil society, the monetary values involved, the logistics, and the sewage close to the Sítio das Neves landfill, we can only conclude that waste-pickers are the agents that are excluded from the circuit of administering and treating waste, even though they are responsible for much of the collection and recycling of reusable waste produced in the city.



## Ten Waste-Pickers (nine men and one woman): Organic Agents, Research Subjects

Through this methodology we were able to trace the socio-demographic profile of the people we interviewed: 99% of which were men with little or no formal education. Some seem to display what we understand to be mental health problems, which we assume to be the result of alcohol and/or drug abuse, considering that many of them would speak of these “vices”.

We immediately noticed that waste-pickers would rarely venture into the stilt area, since they could then be confused with burglars, and all of them mentioned how dangerous that would be. According to E. P. Silva, “I don’t pick in the stilts, no... There I’m taken for a thief... it’s dangerous”. Urban panning is mostly focused on aluminum, but this material is heavily coveted: “we get plastic bottles... They are worth much less than aluminum, but I make more than with cardboard and much more than glass”, says E. L. dos Santos. Plastic bottles are also coveted, because, even though they are worth less than aluminum, they are worth more or less three times what cardboard makes, and five times more than glass.

S. M. de Oliveira is 43 years old, though he appears to be much older, and lives in the Caminho de São Sebastião. He limps: “A long time ago I got shot in the leg”; we nonetheless walk together for a whole day, covering some 4 km (Figures 11 and 12).

Figures 11, 12 – S. M. de Oliveira



Source: Authors' photos.

S. M. de Oliveira tells us that “I only collect in the Dique region [...] I don’t know why these people throw everything in the streets”. We notice that he traces a correlation between formal education and trash when he tells us that “there are very few schools that separate trash”.

S. M. de Oliveira considers that one of his larger problems as a waste-picker is “when there is little material to pick”, along with the size of his cart which “had to be bigger because it could carry more things and serve to carry things when I’m not picking”. He repeatedly complains that “a larger cart would be really good”.

When we start to ask him about what is nature and technology, he provided fragmentary answers. On nature, S. M. de Oliveira simply says: “it’s everything”. On technology he quips, “I can’t explain”.

E. L. dos Santos (illiterate, no documents), known as “Crazy”, 48 years old, lived on a vacant lot on the Brigadeiro Faria Lima Street when we interviewed him. During our walk, he taught us some of his picking techniques. For example, how to burn copper wires without generating smoke: “you just through a thick sponge over it”. He made a point of saying that “copper wiring is one of the materials that pays the most” and “that is why it’s so coveted”. He then offered his own social analysis: “that’s what makes people steal the wiring for electric energy and street lighting”. He claims that he “only picks in the Dique region”. He was also the only one to say: “I’m scared, but I pick below the stilts” (Figures 13 and 14).

Figures 13, 14 – E. L. dos Santos



Source: Author's photo.

Regarding irregular disposal, he noted that “people aren’t very aware that too much trash can cause global warming”, immediately adding that “excess rain is what hampers us the most because people don’t even discard anything”. As to what would improve day-to-day conditions for waste-pickers, he was adamant: “a physical space for storing things [...]. So that I could gather, separate and sell for a better price because, gathering everything, we earn more”. As for nature, he was emphatic: “to see the world always clean, nature was made to be preserved, many trees, clean streets. Farms, smell of fresh fruit. It’s always keeping the world clean”. But as for technology, “Ah, I don’t know that!”.

At every stage of our wayfaring observation, we thought: “what is the *human condition* of these waste-pickers”? Hannah Arendt (2007) claims that humans are conditioned beings, such that everything they come into contact with immediately becomes a condition of their existence within a determinate space. It can thus be said that life, natality and mortality, plurality and Planet Earth determine the human condition (Arendt, 2007) and relate to three fundamental activities that characterize life on earth: “labor”, “work”, and “action”. Labor is every activity that corresponds to the biological process of the human body, it is related to the vital necessities that are produced and introduced in the life process. During our wayfaring observation we noticed that waste-pickers are not included within work, but, rather, within labor, as their condition as a waste-pickers only ever attends to vital needs. As Arendt (2007) observes, labor ensures the survival of the individual and the life of the species.

When we compare autonomous waste-pickers to those linked to cooperatives, we find that the latter has surpassed labor and do “work”, since they benefit from an “organizational” structure for storing, processing and distributing waste. Following Arendt (2007: 16-17): “work and its product, the human artifact, lend a degree of permanence and durability to the futility of mortal life and the ephemeral character of human time”

Analyzing the shape of life, the ways of being of our research subjects through Arendt’s perspective, we may say that waste-pickers can be conceived of as subjects that live only for labor, that is, to ensure their survival. We thus ask: can government and civil society organizations create the conditions for these subjects to also be included in the activities of work and (political) action?

D. de Camarrgo, the only white waste-picker we interviewed, 52 years old and resident in the Caminho de São Sebastião, is one of the veteran waste-pickers of the region, the only one to own a small deposit and a registry card with the Santos Mayor’s Office (Figures 15, 16 and 17). He told us this of his life: “I have a son who is addicted to crack and we [his wife and him] take care of our grandson... Miguel... He’s 7 years old [...] he has a bit of autism [...]”. He says that he has “a brick house to live in”. Indeed, he is the only one we spoke to who has one.

Regarding where he picks, D. de Camargo said: “I almost always pick in the vicinity of Santa Maria, close to the Horto, in Divineia and in Bom Retiro”. Highly attentive to the environment, he complains that “it’s these druggies who dirty the streets the most”, and adds: “did you know that the police gets us [waste-pickers] mixed up with druggies? They think we’re thieves [...] Oh! If we had a card that proved we were waste-pickers, I don’t think the police would mix us up”. They survive off labor, after all, without participating in the world of formal work.

When we ask him what would improve his working conditions, he thought for a while and said: “a government pension would be good wouldn’t it?”, and that “if the prices of the digital scale and the cart were cheaper, that would be even better”. On nature, he ponders that it is “everything” and that he wants “the mangroves and the streets clean”. On technology, his answer was: “you need to rationalize, what I do is technology”.

**Figures 15, 16, 17** – Adapted bicycle, small deposit, D. in action in the patio of his house



Source: Authors' photos

W. A. da Silva, 32 years old, said he was from Peruibe and that he was only passing through Santos. He was picking with his brother, V. A. da Silva (Figure 18), who also walked with us and answered our questions. W. A. da Silva tells us that “we want to get out of here... I think we’ll go to Mogi das Cruzes... We came here [to the Santos lowlands] to try something, but it didn’t work out!”. They claimed that “people don’t think of trash, it’s automatic” (W. A. da Silva), and they “get pickers mixed up with druggies”, although they, the waste-pickers, “only help out”. They note that “there started to be a lot of pickers in the streets, particularly after this disease [referring to the Covid-19 pandemic]... it’s gotten even harder” (V. A. da Silva). On nature, V. A. da Silva replied: “we’ve never seen nature properly... we came from Guarulhos and now we’re going to Mogi”. W. A. da Silva provided a similar answer about technology: “it’s what we do, look and separate material”; “that’s technology, right?”

**Figure 18** – W. (striped shirt) e V. (printed shirt) A. da Silva



Source: Authors' photo.

F. L. de Jesus, 41 years old, had evident mental issues, perhaps as a consequence of drug use. He was exceptionally solicitous and provided sensitive answers. He said he lived “there at the back of the Brigadeiro Faria Lima Avenue” and that he would pick material “wherever there is a dumpster”; he explained to us that he gets more “cans, copper, cardboard, and takes it to Marcelo and Gabiru’s deposit, in the Caminho de São José”. He didn’t know how to answer questions on the relationship between people and waste, and wanted to talk mostly of his own life: “I believe in people, they were good, I was the bad one because I was addicted to crack, I’ve stolen, I’ve been arrested, but God saved me” (Figure 19).

Figure 19 – F. L. de Jesus



Source: Authors' photo.

During our conversation he brought up existential questions, such as when he said: “our biggest problem is inside of us” and that “money is not what’s most important, living well is more important!”. He reminisced of his past, laced with guilt: “I don’t steal anymore... now I pick and I don’t let evil into me”. He could not provide an answer about technology, but said that nature “is hope”. He confessed to have been happy at our conversation, since it had been some time since anyone spoke to him “like a person”.

When we compare the material conditions of D. de Camargo, a white man with lighter eyes, to that of the other waste-pickers, either those considered “brown” (*pardo*) such as E. P. da Silva, M. S. Elias, and T. Ferreira, or darker, such as S. M. de Oliveira, F. L. de Jesus e the brothers W. e V. A. da Silva, we find that D. de Camargo is the only one with a fixed address, a brick house, and a small deposit. Even if all waste-pickers suffer from their historical socio-economic exclusion, the greater vulnerability of Black waste-pickers, whose biographies make evident the implications of race, is an indisputable fact. As Gonzales and Hasenbalg (1982: 15):

The material existence of this Black population refers to psychological conditionings that must be attacked and unmasked. The different modalities of domination in the different phases of economic production in Brazil seem to converge on the same point: a reinterpretation of Aristotle’s theory of natural place. From colonial times until the present day, we get the existence of an evident separation of the physical space occupied by the dominators and the dominated. The natural place of the dominant white group is amplified homes [...] duly protected by different sorts of policing: from the old slave-owners, slave-hunters, henchmen, etc., up until a formally constituted police force. From the old plantation houses and multi-story city houses to the beautiful buildings and residences of today. The natural place of the Black man is, evidently, the opposite: from the slave quarters to the favelas, tenement houses, basements, invaded lands, waterlogged areas and “habitational” units (the model for which were the ghettos of developed countries) of today, the criteria has also been symmetrically inverse: the racial division of space [...] Within the dominated group, what we find are whole families packed into cubicles, with the most precarious hygiene and health conditions. Here, too, we find police presence: only not to protect, but to repress, to violate, to cause fear. Through this we understand that the other natural place of Blacks is the prison, the asylum [...].

Even if D. de Camargo’s house is much more modest than those in the above description, the racial issue is doubtlessly explicit when his material conditions are compared to that of the other waste-pickers who participated in this research.

E. P. da Silva, 33 years old, told us: “I walk through all of the city”, but he lives in the Morros region. Unlike the others, he displayed a general lack of faith in humanity. When asked why people throw trash out in the streets, he told us: “human beings are evil, cruel, they mix food with shit” so that they [waste-pickers] could not eat it; they “cut up the clothes they throw away so we can’t use them” (Figure 20). He accepted that “there are good people, but the majority is bad”. He said he wandered the whole city picking material. Wherever there is trash, he goes; he said that the day before he had been in the São Bento Hill, and during the day he was interviewed he was in the stilts, and that picking is “a matter of looking, whoever looks finds it” and that “to win you have to do, you have to chase”. He said that his biggest difficulty was going to the toilet: “where am I to go if I have a stomach ache?”. Yet he also said that living in the streets “isn’t hard, there’s food, there’s a lot of people who help out”, there are “hostels... so much so that druggies have cash to buy drugs”.

**Figure 20** – E. P. da Silva



Source: Author's photo.

Regarding the places he walks through to pick, he claims: “I live on the streets... everyone carries in their chest what they know”. Today “people are paying the price”. On nature, he replied quickly: “it’s the air I breathe, the water I drink, and, in a way, I’m helping. How long does one of the plastic bottles I pick take to disappear?”. On technology, he was direct: “appliances for me to sell”. He made a point of posing for his portrait, with the chords and gadgets he had in his bag (Figure 20). For him, everything that “we” discard “they” reuse with an intelligence that is reflected in a sharp eye, in tact, and in the imaginative capacity to think through multiple forms of using electronic waste. While we, purportedly inserted in the Capitalist system of production and consumption, are, in reality, submitted to a process of “machinic enslavement”, a concept coined by Deleuze and Guattari, and developed by Lazzarato (2014: 28-30):

Enslavement works with decoded flows (abstract work flows, monetary flows, sign flows, etc) which are not centered on the individual and human subjectivity but on enormous social machinisms (corporations, the collective infrastructures of the welfare state, communications systems, etc.) [...] the individual is no longer instituted as an “individuated subject,” “economic subject” (human capital, entrepreneur of the self), or “citizen.” He is

instead considered a gear, a cog, a component part in the “business” and “financial system” assemblages, in the media assemblage, and the “welfare state” assemblage and its collective institutions (schools, hospitals, museums, theaters, television, Internet, etc.). Enslavement is a concept that Deleuze and Guattari borrowed explicitly from cybernetics and the science of automation. It means the “management” or “government” of the components of a system. A technological system enslaves (“governs” or “manages”) variables (temperature, pressure, force, speed, output, etc.), ensuring the cohesion and equilibrium of the functioning of the whole. Enslavement is the mode of control and regulation (“government”) of a technical or social machine such as a factory, business, or communications system.

As a counterpart, this enslavement of instituted subjects, the autonomous waste-pickers, who, in the Marxist view, because of their marginal and erratic condition, make up the lumpenproletariat, configure a sort of line of flight from the system, since, while they remain at the margins, they can contribute to resetting it through their capacity to put to new uses discarded materials. Furthermore, they are able to establish the relations between humans and nonhumans, relations that go beyond the utilitarianism that is typical of the predatory relation fostered by the programmed obsolescence of the Capitalist mode of production and discard.

Are they then involved in micropolitics, even if they, themselves, remain unaware of it? Krenak (2019: 12) says: “...micropolitics is disseminating and will take the place of disillusion with macropolitics. The agents of micropolitics are planting gardens in their backyards, opening up sidewalks so that anything at all may grow”. Picking and selling sold waste, it is our view that waste-pickers are bringing to light the urban environmental chaos that is relegated by macropolitics.

E. dos Santos, 44 years old, was the only woman we approached. She was with her adult son and her partner, all of whom lived in the Caminho de São Sebastião.<sup>7</sup> She said that they would “pick anywhere there is aluminum” and that “the bad thing is that people could gather everything to make it easier for us... but no, they throw away everything together at once [...]”. She also complains that, now, “there are too many people and little material [...] people don’t know how to separate things properly [...] they mix up glass and cut us... sometimes we get seriously injured”.

When we asked what could improve the system of work, she was emphatic: “Ah! We need to increase the value that we get for cans and for everything”. And that, “If I could I’d go pick in another neighborhood... one where people have money, because their trash is better than this one here”. On nature, she said: “ah, it’s life, right? Air, human beings, the environment... flower, tree, animals, good air, not polluted. It’s everything...”. In contrast, on technology she claimed: “It’s TV, Radio, cellphone. It’s where you communicate your work”.

M. S. Elias, 38 years old, is from a lot places but “mostly from the Center”. He has picked in the Northwest Zone of Santos for 20 years, and notes that “people throw trash away in any manner and they throw it in the streets, because they don’t want it anymore, because it piles up, attracts critters, and they don’t want trash nearby... who does, right?”.

To improve his day-to-day activities, the waste-picker said “that it would be very good to have a place to store the material, with a lock, about 10 x 10, you know? Because, like, if I pick and fall asleep, I’ll be robbed... I have been many times”. On daily work, he claims: “I find everything... If I walk a lot I can make some R \$100.00 a day”. On nature, he underscores the idea that it is everything because it is from nature “that we live”. Technology is “luxury... you don’t need to make an effort for anything, it’s easy, it’s not having to go to the bus stop, the car comes to you right?”. “You just flick it on and everything is at hand. The radio turns itself on, the car window closes by itself”. When asked what he would consider to be good technology for him, he replied: “it would be good if everything were separated”.

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<sup>7</sup> They did not consent to being photographed.

T. Ferreira, 23 years old, was the youngest and most literate of our interviewees. He explains that he “almost finished high school... I did wrong things but I was never arrested”. He told us that “I came from the country and I don’t have a definite place to live... I stay on the streets... these days I’m in front of a baker’s [marquee] in the Rádio Clube neighborhood”... “I came from São Roque... I walk a lot through the Vila São Jorge... close to the scrapyards of an old friend of mine” (Figure 21).

On the problems that he faces daily as a waste-picker, he says that “the largest problem is glass... I’ve been badly cut up”. And he takes a condemnatory tone:

What outrages me most of all, and now I’m just venting, is that the person looks at us, we’re recycling, with discrimination, but they don’t stop to analyze that all of this that we’re recycling comes from their homes. They just see me sorting through trash and they look at me in disgust... but, man!, this just came from his house!

And he adds: “... as if it were a crime to look at trash, of course some pickers contribute to this discrimination, because they overturn everything, throw everything on the floor. Because of the actions of a few we all pay”.

As to what he needs to survive, he said: “I don’t even want to make any more money... If I make little, when I’m tired I stop and that’s it”. He confessed that he doesn’t want to make any more because “I need to pick exactly 62 cans per day... that will see to my coke addiction”.

On nature, he says: “Oh! I don’t know how to explain... If we open our eyes and look around us, it’s there, right?”. As he says this, birds start to chirp and he asks: “did you see? Birds chirping?”. On technology, he claims:

It’s a great advantage for humanity, but with the country we have, the government, technology is nothing... Humans are the most intelligent beings on earth... I’ve seen a person get a water pipe and make a tent for their bicycle. Look! It’s so much wisdom and stupidity at the same time. You have power and at the same time you throw this power to the wind. Look at the asphalt itself; it’s made from car tyres...

Figure 21 – T. Ferreira



Source: Authors' photo.



## Transversal Reflections: Humanities, Technology, Nature

As we carried out our research through wayfaring observation, an inconvenient question came up: what does our social imagination associate poverty with dirt? Where does this association come from? When we see public agents working in sanitation and waste-pickers walking the streets, the physical appearance of most of these people is that of Black workers from the lower classes. If they are always the ones cleaning our streets, why do we consider these poor people to be filthy while rich people are not? One answer might be: filthy places, filthy people, since, in order to clean, they must mix up with and be contaminated by dirt; hence, for dealing with trash and filth, there is an association between these undesired things and these people.

Reflecting on what humanity is and what are humans within this system structured by violence and destruction, Ailton Krenak (2019), starting from the cultured experience of the Krenak people, for whom nature is incorporated into being, asks himself: “How is it that, over the last 2 to 3 thousand years, we have constructed the idea of humanity?” (Krenak 2019: 10-11) [...] “Are we really a single humanity?” (Krenak 2019: 12). Answering these questions, Krenak does not spare any critique of the “more consolidated institutions, such as universities, multilateral organisms which have emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” (Krenak 2019: 12). For Krenak, throughout the last century, and even today, these institutions only validate the relation between the Capitalist system and the destruction of *Gaya*: “it’s as if it were enough to leave a few places as free samples of Earth. If we survive, we’ll fight for the pockets of the earth that we have not yet eaten (Krenak 2019: 12). For him, our descendants “will be able to travel to see how Earth was in the past” (Krenak 2019: 13). These structures and social mechanisms, which regiment the behavior of humanity through their social function, “were configured and maintained as structures of this very humanity” (Krenak 2019: 13) and we submit to their violence because they are “at the service of the humanity we think we are” (Krenak 2019: 14).

How can we justify that we are one humanity when more than 70% are completely alienated from the exercise of being? [...] people were ripped out from their collectives, their places of origin, and thrown into this blender called humanity. If people do not have deep ties to their ancestral memory, with the references that sustain an identity, they are going to go mad in this world which we share. (Krenak 2019: 14)

When we consider what Krenak is saying, we can associate his ideas with those of the philosopher Marilena Chaui (1999: 153), who argues that there is no difference between perception and sensation, because experience always bears meaning, that is, it is perceived and attributed meaning within our life history, it is part of the world of the subject and her experiences. Perception and sensation, therefore, are always cohesive, they do not come in isolated fragments because the world is not a collection or sum of isolated things. Rather, it is organized in complex structures and forms that bear meaning.

Since perception, including filth, disturbs us most of all as a sensory violence to sight and smell, we understand that filth must be extirpated from social life. Another characteristic of filth is its ephemerality as matter, since it degrades, which is one of its defining characteristics, associated to the sensory sacrifice that is demanded if we are to live with it. Its degradation is what speeds up the process of collecting and removing waste from the vicinity of privileged spaces. As soon as we remove it from our homes, we erase it from our thoughts. We thus ask: what about those who collect this waste? These are, precisely, the vulnerable individuals who, by virtue of recovering and resignifying waste, come to be confused with it. At the end of the day, we, privileged whites from the upper classes, do not want to reflect on the importance of waste-pickers and our need for existing with them. Further reflection necessarily leads to awareness of our privilege, which causes fear in us – after all, we have constructed a humanity that we feel we are all a part of!

Ironically, the physical and mental degradation of the human being is much faster than that of solid waste, but, when we consider humid waste, the individuals who collect it can lose their dignity in the time that decomposition takes. Every day they see their condition as subjects being subtracted, until many of them

become homeless. The condition of citizenship is thus systematically denied to them, and the subject follows the path of degradation until she loses any shred of autonomy and comes to depend completely on the tutelage of other to survive. According to Santana et al (2009: 6) and Santos and Manfrim (2015),

[...] it is within the framework of informal work that we find the waste-picker, characterized as the spare population that is unable to participate in work processes, who faces precarious and unhealthy working conditions to ensure subsistence. Lacking social protection and effective intervention by government, waste-pickers not only engage in highly dangerous work, they are also in the state of extreme poverty.

This “spare population” is made up of people who, even while they remain invisible to the eyes of the state and society-at-large, are able to survive, to resist, and to articulate empirical knowledge of the streets with a sensible perception of the relationship between nature, human beings, and technology, as glimpsed in the replies given by our research subjects.

As we can see in the pictures, there is a large concentration of waste near the stilts, accumulated in the Rio dos Bugres and the narrow alleys, a situation which residents are fully aware of. One hypothesis for understanding this excess is that human beings create dirt to appropriate the space in which they are, as Serres (2011) explains in *Malféasance: Appropriation Through Pollution?* By claiming that “carnivorous mammals mark their territories by urine” (Serres, 2011: 11), or that “to conserve something proper to itself, the body knows to leave behind a personal fragment: sweat on clothing, saliva on food, or other indelicacies” (Serres, 2011: 14). Serres is attentive to the importance of waste as a marker: marks need to be left in the territory so that we may recognize ourselves in it, while a clean territory has no definite property. He further stresses that such markers are not only physical or durable, coming from the body, for there are also symbolic, or soft, markers, such as names, incisions, colors, flags, propaganda...” (Serres 2011: 36). That is, “the proper is the dirty”, and dirt can also symbolize our memories, “each stain on the sofa, or even an old scribble in a notebook, compose the affective memories of many people” (Serres 2011: 15).

This reflection of Serres became the *parti pris* for us to think of how the most varied forms of waste express more than obsolescence, discard, accumulation: they are traces of appropriation that is characteristic of all of us in the places where we live and through which we pass; they are the most definite proof of our corporeal and cultural relation of separation from the environment that surrounds us. We establish utilitarian relations with everything that is outside of our bodies: the environment becomes the receptacle for all of our solid, liquid, gaseous, and symbolic waste which is no longer useful to us. They do not vanish, they only cease to be useful and thus come to dirty, infect and destroy the environment.

It is a fact that there are many agents of pollution: the population, companies, institutions, and governments, while only waste-pickers collect, take away, clean and resignify what everyone discards. Research carried out by the Applied Economics Research Institute (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, Ipea) revealed that almost 90% of recycled waste in Brazil is due to the work of these professionals. According to the National Movement of Recycled Material Pickers, some 800 thousand of these professionals are active today. Yet it remains an unregulated profession, with low wages.

In fact, wages are so low that most of these people work day and night and do not even manage to secure fixed addresses. They also have to deal with a large measure of prejudice. For Professor Gonçalo Guimarães (2011: 13), member of the Incubadora Tecnológica de Cooperativas Populares (ITCP) of the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (Coppe-UFRJ), we must be attentive to the social time of each group: “it is one day at a time, the day is the biological cycle of survival. Waste-pickers are urban extractivists, panners, informal workers with an acute socio-environmental perception and a socio-technic skill” (Guimarães, 2011: 13). This partly accounts for the problem at the heart of this research, since it is not for a lack of technical skill that waste-pickers are

unable to integrate into the complex network that envelops society, technology, economy, and the environment, but because there is a systematic process that makes the invisible and disqualifies their participation in waste management policies in Brazil.

Within this symbiotic triad of “nature, technology and humanity”, the human being is not only a dependent, but one who also sees herself doubly threatened: on the one hand, by extreme climate events, and, on the other, by the development of machines that eliminate jobs and make objects and knowledge obsolete at a frightening pace. It is a fact that technology is increasingly taking the place of the demiurge in contemporary society, a role that had previously fallen to nature, always treated with respect and scared admiration by ancestral people.

Having followed discussions on the socio-environmental crisis for more than twenty years, we notice that it becomes more complex and assumes the contours of the mythical Tower of Babel; that is, *a priori*, it is a crisis of communication between agents, particularly at the macrolevel. In contrast, it is in organic, resilient, often marginal spaces that Indigenous peoples, maroons, peasants, river-dwellers, sharecroppers, small-level extractivists, and waste-pickers, display a strong sense of community, of a *common* space in the etymological sense of *communication*. It is important that we pay attention to the fact that the inhabitant of the coast of the state of São Paulo, culturally and historically known as *caiçara*, has strong ties to Indigenous traditions and their symbiotic relation with nature, as analyzed by Krenak (2019: 12):

[...] humanity is gradually detached in such an absolute manner from this organism which is the earth, that the only nuclei that still consider that they need to be attached to this earth are those that sort of got forgotten at the borders of the planet, on the banks of the rivers, the edges of the oceans, in Africa, Asia or Latin America. They are *caiçaras*, Indigenous people, maroons, aborigines – sub-humanity. Because there is a – let’s call it – cool humanity. And there is a more brutish, rustic, organic layer, a sub-humanity, a people who remain attached to the earth. It’s as if they want to eat the earth, suckle on the earth, lying down on the earth, wrapped in earth. The organicity of these people is something that bothers, to the extent that corporations have created an increasing number of mechanisms to separate these cubs of the earth from their mother.

For years the anthropologist Massimo Di Felice has been studying the relationship between digital media and sustainability. In an interview to the site *Ideias Sustentáveis*, Di Felice (*apud* Piche 2013) claims:

Western man has established a separation between man and environment, man and nature, man and skill. This conception comes from Greek humanism: man as the center of society and the territory around him, as if he did not dwell in it. This is the same view that generates the destruction of the environment [...] It is a conception that man has nothing to do with the environment.

For Di Felice, this separation brought us to the Anthropocene and the internet and connectivity, since it “inverts this process” and introduces this culture that makes it so that “we perceive of ourselves not only as dependent on the environment, but also as a part of it” (*apud* Piche 2013). That is, for the anthropologist, we, contemporary citizens, know that “we are one of the nodes in a more complex network” in which everything we cause generates “an impact on the whole, which, in turn, has an impact on us”. Thus, the concept of connectivity is that start of a new concept of ecology, since it moves beyond connection through technology: connectivity happens “in a culture that places us in a different relation with the environment and nature. Therefore, all of this complex represents a new type of ecology [...] it is the culture of the web and connectivity that inverts this process” (*apud* Piche 2013).

Starting from these reflections and the narratives of our research subjects, we see that waste-pickers do not perceive themselves to be part of a western system, one which separates man from nature, man from skill. When we look at waste-pickers, the way they walk amidst their deteriorated, smelly, filthy environment; how

they use their hands; the timid way they look at us and their answers to our questions (or their silence), we envisage the possibility that they understand themselves to be “not only dependent on the environment but, indeed, part of it, and, furthermore, actors in it” (*apud* Piche 2013).

It is hence urgent that we read and understand the thought of authors who have historically defended cultures and traditions will only be respected if they are ensured their right to transmit and narrate their values. If it is death which confers authority to the narrator, as Walter Benjamin (1985) noted, centuries of the extermination of Black and Indigenous peoples confer on these traditions the authority to validate the discourse that they disseminate in the contemporary world. We must listen to these narratives in movement. Hence the proposal for a wayfaring methodology, to understand the dynamic of the Ariadne’s thread of the daily environmental action of these people, the so-called waste-pickers, who make possible not only their own survival, but also ours (or would we survive crushed by rubbish on all sides?).

### **Final Thought (or) Which Ways Out?**

Through wayfaring observation, by listening, following and interacting with waste-pickers, we see their knowledge, sensitivity and intelligence for providing original and creative input to the system or reutilizing waste, including what pertains to the relationship between technology and nature.

By tracking the path of residues in the city of Santos, with a special focus on the creation and growth of Dique da Vila Gilda, we can say that rationality, whether in business, production, government or the state, can, on their own, account for the monumental problem of waste. Even if it is the responsibility of government, without listening to society and including others, namely waste-pickers – that is, without dialogue that includes all agents in the cycle of production and discard of waste, and without sociotechnical knowledge and environmental sensibility – any policy will end up being far too costly for the public treasury and dangerously harmful to nature.

According to the 2020 Panorama of Solid Waste, produced by the Brazilian Association of Public Waste Disposal Companies (Associação Brasileira das Empresas de Limpeza Pública (Abrelpe), between 2010 and 2019 the generation of waste in Brazil increased from 67 million to 79 million tons per year, which amounts to a rise of 18% in 9 years. That is 30 million tons of waste disposed of in open air sites, popularly known as *lixões* (literally, ‘big trashes’). In 2010 the National Policy of Solid Waste was sanctioned with the aim of ensuring that all *lixões* were extinct by 2014. This never happened, and, almost a decade later, there are still three thousand open air garbage dumps in the country (Abrelpe, 2017).

The mechanisms of listening to and inviting the participation of society must be perfected and effectively incorporated into public policies by administrators, so that public hearings and councils can, in fact, ensure social participation and place the interests of the public above those of finance. Non-government organizations, cooperatives and social movements, all have much to contribute in managing waste, with their socio-technical knowledge and sensitivity, since they are the closest pole to waste-pickers.

Our theoretical and affective filiation with Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Felix Guattari and Ailton Krenak provides us with a few clues, starting from the assumption that the urgent times in which we live demand changes to our mindset, if we are to face this deplorable landscape, in three ways. First, we must admit that no agent can, in isolation, provide ready-made answers. We must therefore consider collective participation in the process of organizing, developing, and implementing initiatives, accounting for the fields of self-administration, social advocacy, cultural respect, environmental care, and economic solidarity in the micro-spaces of territories (a condition, therefore, is that actions be rooted in a physical territory).

Second, we must understand technology as Guattari (1990), who claimed that it is the social machine that produces the technological machine, and not the other way around. Not all technology needs to be complex, high-tech and expensive. The concept of *social technology* was coined precisely to show that technology can be more democratic and alternative to conventional technology, as Di Felice rightly stresses, since it welds popular knowledge, social organization and technical-scientific knowledge. Waste-pickers display a particular and pragmatic view of what technology is. Indeed, certain simple instruments could help them in their daily affairs, such as signaling (intelligent clothing), metal detectors, automatic wire strippers, etc; but are these instruments enough to afford them more perspectives? Only through participative experiences, mechanisms of listening and adapting, can these hypotheses be tested.

In the contemporary context of climate emergence, the education process infers a practice that is at once cultural and communicational. It is cultural in what concerns ancestralities, belongings, symbolic universes, heritage, arts, identities, and alterities. It is communicational in the intensive and immersive use of language and media to construct a minimal common territory in which people can, in fact, perceive themselves as equal, even if diverse, considering also the important role of nonhuman beings in the current context: viruses, bacteria, intelligent machines, biodiversity.

We believe that we must overcome anthropocentrism and technocentrism, and that we must dare to give us a chance. For, if there are many parallel worlds in the contemporary Tower of Babel, it is only through education, communication, and culture that we can build bridges that link these worlds and creates equity between its agents.

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# Recycling, caring and chatting at the Food Bike: Citizen Participation in a Waste Management Experiment in Hengelo, the Netherlands

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## Abstract

The food bike (*voedselfiets*) project in the city of Hengelo (Netherlands) was designed to stimulate citizens to separate organic from residual waste. The food bikes take standard routes with designated stops to collect food waste from residents in high-rise neighbourhoods, which lack space to separate organic waste in garbage containers. Data were collected by a mix of qualitative research methods, which allowed to develop a holistic and contextualized view of the reasons why citizens joined this environmental initiative. The from literature well-known factors of idealism and self-interest can partly explain participation in the food bike project, but we have found that a habitus of not wasting food and social needs are also important reasons for people to participate. Especially older people take part in the project because the food bikes suit their habitus of frugality. The social interaction -behaving in a desirable way in the eyes of neighbours, and chatting at the bikes- stand in marked contrast to collection of waste by garbage trucks, in which contact is avoided as much as possible. The social aspect was reinforced during the Corona crisis, when indoor social contact was discouraged by the Dutch government. As it is, municipal efforts to promote pro-environmental behaviour build on the idealism and perceived self-interest of citizens, but could also make use of the social and emotional considerations of prospective participants and their attachment to the neighbourhood.

**Key words:** pro-environmental behaviour; circular economy; citizen participation; habitus; food waste; neighbourhood cohesion.



# Reciclando, cuidando e conversando na *Food Bike*: Participação cidadã em um experimento de gestão de resíduos em Hengelo, na Holanda.

## Resumo

O projeto Food Bike (voedselfiets) na cidade de Hengelo (Holanda) foi concebido para estimular os cidadãos a separar os resíduos orgânicos dos não orgânicos. As food bikes seguem rotas padronizadas com paradas designadas para coletar resíduos alimentares de moradores de bairros altos, que não têm espaço para separar os resíduos orgânicos em recipientes de lixo. Os dados foram recolhidos através de uma combinação de métodos de investigação qualitativa, o que permitiu desenvolver uma visão holística e contextualizada das razões pelas quais os cidadãos aderiram a esta iniciativa ambiental. Os fatores bem conhecidos de idealismo e interesse próprio da literatura podem explicar parcialmente a participação no projeto da Food Bike, mas descobrimos que o hábito de não desperdiçar alimentos e as necessidades sociais também são razões importantes para as pessoas participarem. Principalmente os idosos participam do projeto porque as Food Bikes atendem ao seu hábito de frugalidade. A interação social - comportar-se de maneira desejável aos olhos dos vizinhos e conversar nas bicicletas - contrasta fortemente com a coleta de lixo por caminhões de lixo, nos quais o contato é evitado tanto quanto possível. O aspecto social foi reforçado durante a crise do Coronavírus, quando o contacto social interior foi desencorajado pelo governo holandês. Atualmente, os esforços municipais para promover o comportamento pró-ambiental baseiam-se no idealismo e no auto-interesse percebido dos cidadãos, mas também podem fazer uso das considerações sociais e emocionais dos potenciais participantes e da sua ligação ao bairro.

**Palavras-chave:** comportamento pró-ambiental; economia circular; participação cidadã; hábito; desperdício de comida; coesão do bairro.

# Recycling, caring and chatting at the Food Bike: Citizen Participation in a Waste Management Experiment in Hengelo, the Netherlands

Jordi Bok and Freek Colombijn

## Introduction

Municipalities in the Netherlands and elsewhere in the global North are increasingly seeing household waste no longer as a sanitary problem in need of disposal but as a resource to be retained in the circular economy. The separation of waste is a crucial step in recycling resources and many policy makers in the Netherlands, both politicians and civil servants at various administrative levels, are seeking ways to separate waste at the source. They do this on the premise that this results in a cleaner product which can be handled more easily downstream and that separation at the source might increase the citizens' awareness of the environmental consequences of their consumptive choices in general. The use of so-called 'food bikes' (*voedsel fietsen*) in the Dutch municipality of Hengelo is one promising experiment in separating household waste at the source as a contribution to the circular economy.

By Dutch standards the municipality of Hengelo (81,000 inhabitants on 1 January, 2022<sup>1</sup>) is a middle-sized city. In line with the Dutch Waste Management Plan 2017-2029 (Ministerie van IenW, 2017) and the EU target of recycling 65 percent of household waste by 2035 (European Commission, 2018), Hengelo aims to reduce the amount of residual solid household waste to 100 kg per person in 2020 and 50 kg by 2030. The municipality has introduced a mixture of strategies to reach this goal. With reversed collecting residual waste must be taken away by the citizens themselves; recyclables are still collected door-to-door. 'Diftar' is the colloquial term for differentiated tariffs for residual solid waste removal. Other strategies are waste coaches and janitors giving advice to citizens, and sharing containers in which citizens can leave belongings to be picked out by others for reuse. And the food bikes.

The municipal government faces the challenge to get citizens involved. How to make them care for their environment? The municipality is a pioneer in trying out new ways of separating at the source in the Netherlands as a whole, but the response of citizens to these reforms has been mixed. Alongside citizens who have enthusiastically endorsed the new policies, others comply indifferently or grudgingly; others even fiercely resist. Waste was a hotly debated topic in the municipal election of 2018 (*TC Tubantia 20-2-2018*), reaching the point of the physical intimidation of aldermen and civil servants (*TC Tubantia 7-9-2018*). Resistance to many initiatives still rumbles on today.

<sup>1</sup> [www.hengelo.nl/inwoners](http://www.hengelo.nl/inwoners) (accessed 7 January, 2022).

In this article we shall focus on the food bikes, a carrier tricycle used for collecting organic waste. The food bike project is a voluntary scheme in which inhabitants of high-rise buildings, who had never had separate containers into which to separate their household waste, can dispose of their organic waste. In contrast to most other municipal initiatives in Hengelo, the food bike can count on an enthusiastic response from many citizens. We have investigated what drives people to participate and whether –and how– participation in the food bike pilot in its turn also contributes to the development of a general pro-environmental behaviour and concern for their direct environment.

Pro-environmental behaviour is usually attributed to a combination of idealism and self-interest, hence cognitive processes. Research about waste management has been dominated by technical experts and, when ordinary people show ‘undesirable behaviour’, this hiccough leads experts to the over-hasty conclusion that these people ‘do not yet understand’. Hence the standard solution used to tackle these reluctant citizens is a mixture of education and awareness campaigns (on food waste Falasconi et al., 2019; Närvänen et al., 2018; Soorani and Ahmadvand, 2019; Zamri et al., 2020; on plastics Auta, Emenike and Fauziah, 2017; Kaiser, 2010); notably the same approach European governments were using to convince citizens who reject vaccination against the Corona virus. The trust in an awareness-raising campaign rests on the assumption that more knowledge leads to a different attitude which, in its turn, leads to behavioural change.

To a large extent, Hengelo’s policies also build on an assumed dose of both idealism and self-interest among its citizens. *Diftar* and reverse-collecting are aimed at addressing people’s financial self-interest and comfort, making them pay more attention to the way they deal with waste and to their consumptive choices. Various campaigns have been launched in order to build this awareness (*TC Tubantia* 17-4-2017). The trust in the development of awareness came strongly to the fore at a 2018 regional waste symposium, attended by one of the authors (Jordi Bok), at which the need to build awareness ran like a scarlet thread throughout the evening’s presentations.

A major conclusion of our research is that, contrary to the assumptions underlying Hengelo’s policies, more factors than idealism and self-interest played a role when we tried to understand the participation in the food bike project. In our research we have used an ethnographic approach to develop a holistic view of the motivations why people participate in the food bike project. Instead of trying to separate factors analytically, we try to show how different elements are integrated into the daily experiences of the people. We argue that this holistic approach to pro-environmental behaviour highlights two other reasons people participate in the food bike project: firstly, the social aspect of the activity and the desire to belong to a local community of like-minded people, and, secondly, an unconscious habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) of not squandering food. The aim of this article is to analyse the reasons the residents in Hengelo take part in the food bike project, by taking a holistic perspective, that is, going a step beyond idealism and self-interest. It is a case study of the fundamental question of what drives people to participate in environmental initiatives. The holistic approach of a qualitative research allows best to see the connections between different reasons why people join this environmental initiative in the context of their everyday lives.

We contextualize the food bike project by analysing it in relation to questions of governance. Assigning to citizens a larger responsibility to do something (here: waste management) which used to be a state task is an example of the ‘participation society’, a new policy launched in the Netherlands in 2013 (Troonrede, 2013). The transition towards this policy has led to frictions because, as Michael Power (1994) has argued, citizens are increasingly approaching the state as consumers: the state has to deliver. This citizen-consumer is either too passive or too outspoken and critical to the government’s liking (Boutellier, 2014; Brandsen, Trommel and Verschuere, 2017). For their part, citizens often complain that they receive neither the support nor faith from the government, which they need to fulfil their new role in the participation society. Moreover, the means and responsibility to enable these tasks to be fulfilled are not fairly distributed (Uitermark, 2015).

In the case of Hengelo, there is more friction between top-down governance and bottom-up participation arising from the unwillingness of citizens to adhere to the policies. For example, a sizable group of citizens discard their residual waste in places other than the assigned containers, sometimes unintentionally but also deliberately, using diverse and inventive strategies to get around them, practising, in the words of James Scott (2009), ‘the art of not being governed’. A subsidiary question of this article is: how does the food bike project relate to this shift towards the ‘participation society’ and the concomitant frictions?

### **Idealism, self-interest or other factors explaining pro-environmental behaviour?**

The growth of the body of literature trying to explain pro-environmental behaviour has kept pace with the deepening of the global environmental crisis. We will follow Li et al. (2019: 29), who define pro-environmental behaviour as ‘purposeful action that can reduce a negative impact on the environment’. Specifying how one can reduce one’s impact, Naoko and Kosuke Kaida write that pro-environmental behaviour can be ‘collectively defined as behavior responsible for protecting the environment in diverse domains including monitoring resource consumption, participating in natural conservation, reducing impact on climate change, and supporting environmentally friendly products’ (Kaida and Kaida, 2016: 1244).

The most often seen explanations of pro-environmental behaviour stem from (socio-)psychological research and focus on moral behaviour and idealism on the one hand, or rational choice and self-interest on the other (Kollmus & Agyeman, 2002; Turaga, Howarth and Borsuk, 2010; Li et al., 2019). Idealism can arise from personal and social norms, but before the norms become active, they must be activated in people (Turaga, Howarth & Borsuk, 2010: 212-214). Theories focusing on rational choice start from the assumption that individuals ‘act to maximize individual utility in conformance with the *homo economicus* model’ and the ‘implication of this assumption for public goods, such as environmental quality, is that the incentive for free riding leads to the sub-optimal provision of public goods’ (Turaga, Howarth & Borsuk, 2010: 217).

Idealism and self-interest are usually interpreted as conflicting attitudes, but they do not have to when we take self-interest as a concept spanning wider than economic rewards or personal comfort. Kaida and Kaida (2016: 1246) argue that ‘the very acts of engaging in pro-environmental behaviour can enhance one’s subjective well-being’. The term ‘warm glow’ is used for this nice feeling about oneself when one behaves altruistically (Turaga, Howarth & Borsuk, 2010: 218) People ‘may prefer to see themselves as “green” rather than “greedy”’ (Bolderdijk et al, 2013: 413). Conversely, ‘violating the activated personal norms by not taking [...pro-environmental] action involves moral costs in terms of guilt, self-deprecation, and loss of self-esteem’ (Turaga, Howarth & Borsuk, 2010: 213).

Both idealism and self-interest can be built into a knowledge–attitude–behaviour model, which supposedly explains how the behaviour of people can be changed in a pro-environmental direction. In the most basic form of this model more environmental knowledge will improve people’s pro-environmental attitude, and an improved attitude will lead to a positive change in environmental behaviour (Kollmus & Agyeman, 2002: 241). However, many studies have convincingly demonstrated that the steps from knowledge to attitude, and attitude to changed behaviour are not straightforward (Berthoû, 2013). In the expanded Theory of Planned Behaviour, a change of attitude does not lead directly to a behavioural change, but attitude together with subjective norms and a perceived control over the situation influence the behavioural intentions, and a change of behavioural intentions can lead to changed behaviour (Kollmus & Agyeman, 2002: 243; Botetzagias, Dima & Malesios, 2015).

This model can be further refined by bringing in more factors found by psychological and sociological research, which explain differences between individuals in pro-environmental behaviour: demographic factors like education, gender, income, social class, age, marital status, place of residence and ethnic background (Botetzagias, Dima & Malesios, 2015; Li et al. 2019, 30; Gifford & Nilsson, 2014: 146-150); pressure from peers and

family (Kollmus & Agyeman 2002: 247); feedback about one's environmental behaviour (Kollmus & Agyeman 2002: 246); childhood experiences in nature (Gifford & Nilsson, 2014: 142); belief that technology will solve our environmental problems (Kollmus & Agyeman 2002: 253); religiosity (Yildirim & Özdemir, 2022; Gifford & Nilsson, 2014: 147-148); parenthood (Dupont, 2004); and place attachment (Li et al., 2019: 28).

Researchers have struggled to maintain an overview of the many factors explaining pro-environmental behaviour. One way to keep an overview is the use of flow diagrams with arrows indicating causal and conditional relationships between variables, ideally with a quantitative measurement of the strength of the relationship (e.g. Bamberg & Möser, 2007; Liu, Teng and Han, 2022; Kaida & Kaida, 2016). Other researchers have sought to group these factors. For instance, Li et al. (2019) distinguish between external variables (norms, costs, convenience) and individual variables (e.g. attitudes, social capital, socioeconomic characteristics, previous experience with pro-environmental behaviour). Naoko and Kosuke Kaida (2016) distinguish between 'antecedent' and 'consequent' factors. They consider idealism and self-interest 'antecedent factors', psychological factors which motivate people to engage in pro-environmental behaviour. Consequent factors are the senses of well-being and satisfaction generated by the pro-environmental behaviour.

While we recognize the strength of the above psychological and sociological studies, we regret that the analysis remains at the level of individuals. Even when researchers speak about social norms, they look at the impact thereof on the behaviour of individuals. We agree with Gert Spaargaren, who proposed a sociological model in which not the individual attitude or norm is at the centre, but 'the actual behavioral practices, situated in time and space' (Spaargaren, 2003: 688).

In the same vein as Spaargaren, Sara Berthoû makes a plea for a 'practice theory', which is 'not a theory as such, but a common denominator for social and cultural studies looking at *everyday life practices*' (Berthoû, 2013: 55; italics in the original). While 'other theoretical approaches place the social in the mind', Berthoû argues, 'practice theory sees the social as constituted in, and productive of, practices. In practice theory individuals are not interesting as actors in and of themselves, but as performers of practices and as a place where a plurality of practices intersect' (Berthoû, 2013: 55). In practice theory, 'instead of understanding pro-environmental behaviour as what people have in common –beliefs, ideas, and norms– it becomes significant to look at what they *do* in common in order to avoid granting beliefs and norms deterministic characteristics that individuals cannot escape or change' (Berthoû, 2013: 65). The words 'beliefs, ideas and norms' in this citation can be read as all sociological and psychological factors mentioned above.

Berthoû was inspired by symbolic interactionism, 'which holds as its premise that the meaning of a situation [...] is produced in the interaction between people or between people and objects. This is to say that meaning is not an independent entity to be revealed "underneath" social life, but something construed in it' (Berthoû, 2013: 57). The ethnographic methodology used in our research aligns perfectly with the 'practice theory' and symbolic interactionism advocated by Berthoû. By this approach new factors come into view, in particular the 'habitus' of participants and the sense of belonging, on which we will come back later in this article.

## The Food Bike Project in Hengelo

The pilot of the food bikes project began in the summer of 2016, initially for three years, after which it was extended to December 2021 when it would be evaluated.<sup>2</sup> The project entails the collection of food waste in high-rise neighbourhoods in which, because of a paucity of outside space, the residents cannot use the garbage containers which residents of ordinary houses have for food and garden waste. The project could potentially reach 7,000 households in Hengelo. Residents collect their food waste at home in standard buckets provided

<sup>2</sup> This evaluation was not available at the time of completion of this article.

by the municipality and empty the buckets into the carrier tricycle at fixed times in the week, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays between 9:00 and 12:00. The food bikes take six standard routes with designated stops at which they wait for participants for thirty minutes. Only food waste is allowed (including bones and fish bones) but biodegradable bags, the remains of plants or potting soil are refused. The food waste is transported by bike to the 'Groentuin' (Green Garden) where it is composted. The compost is later used in the Groentuin itself or in municipal parks.<sup>3</sup>

Participation is free of charge and prior registration is unnecessary. All the residents need to do is to ask for a bucket from the driver of the food bike. Other buckets are banned and it is not permitted to leave the bucket on the street to be emptied by the drivers of the food bikes; the drivers are not bin men and the residents have to empty the buckets themselves. Ideally, they do this on all three days because fresh food waste can be composted better than waste which has been kept for a longer time.

A study of the economic and environmental impact of the project found that, in 2018, before the expansion of the project in 2020, some 500 households took part in the project. The project definitely helped to reduce the production of greenhouse gases compared to a situation in which the food was thrown away with the residual waste. However, the reduction of greenhouse gases would have been even bigger if the food waste had been burnt to generate electricity. The cost of processing the food waste was also higher than the collection and burning of the waste (Mulder et al., 2020: 30-34).

One important subsidiary function of the project is that the people who ride the food bikes and are employed in the Groentuin are people who find it difficult to find a job on a fully open job market because of some handicap, or, to use the term accepted by policy makers, people 'with some distance to the labour market'. The project provides them with work and ideally is helping them to find a regular job. This subsidiary function of the food bike tends to be rather hidden from view, perhaps intentionally. The project is in the hands of SWB Midden Twente. SWB stands for Sociaal Werk Bedrijf (sheltered workshop), but SWB only uses the abbreviation in its official communications, as if to hide the character of the organization.<sup>4</sup> Because it is an activity run by the sheltered workshop, the municipality can justify the extra cost of collecting the food waste in this labour-intensive manner.<sup>5</sup>

We have observed a discrepancy between, on the one hand, the formal procedure of the food bikes set out on the municipal website and, on the other hand, the messier reality. Participants do not always bring their residual rubbish in the designated bucket, exceed the limits of the bucket and people who have no bucket – some of whom living in low-rise houses – also manage to slip in. The municipal policy makers know this and tend to tolerate it as long as it does not get out of hand. Ironically, it might cause problems when the programme becomes so successful that too much food waste is being offered, that is, when capacity of the composting machines is surpassed. Although some cyclists do point out that the participant should bring a bucket next time, we rarely observed people without one being turned away. The cyclists check the purity of the food waste and, when necessary, remove unsuitable waste and tell residents to separate correctly. The behaviour seen as the most problematic is caused by those people who leave bags with their food waste at the stops before the cyclist has arrived. This behaviour can upset the neighbours because the street looks untidy and the rubbish can easily litter the street.

3 [www.hengelo.nl/Welkom-in-Hengelo/GPDC-Producten-catalogus-1/\\_Burger-en-Bedrijven/Voedsel.fiets.html](https://www.hengelo.nl/Welkom-in-Hengelo/GPDC-Producten-catalogus-1/_Burger-en-Bedrijven/Voedsel.fiets.html) [https://www.hengelo.nl/Welkom-in-Hengelo/GPDC-Producten-catalogus-1/\\_Burger-en-Bedrijven/Voedsel.fiets.html](https://www.hengelo.nl/Welkom-in-Hengelo/GPDC-Producten-catalogus-1/_Burger-en-Bedrijven/Voedsel.fiets.html) (accessed 19-1-2021).

4 For instance in its website, <https://www.swb.nl> (accessed 7-1-2022).

5 The amount of work involved equals around four full-time jobs (Mulder et al., 2020: 34).

## Methodology

Our analysis is based on ethnographic data collected by one of us (Jordi Bok) from October to December 2018, as part of a larger, exploratory research project on citizen participation in Hengelo's waste management. The municipality was reluctant to let us interview the cyclists, feeling that these people 'with some distance to the labour market' should be protected, but we were free to talk to the residents who made use of the food bikes. We made some additional observations and held interviews on site in January 2021 in order to see how the food bike project had fared during the Corona lockdown of 2020-2021.

Our principal method was participant observation at the stops of the food bikes. Ideally, a researcher doing participant observation would ride a food bike or live in the neighbourhood but both these options had to be ruled out for practical reasons. (For several days, Jordi did join one waste coach and two janitors on their walks, though.) What the researcher did was being there where the interaction takes place, observing and having casual talks with both the cyclists (3 persons) and the residents (18 persons). If time allowed an interview, a topic list with open questions was used (15 interlocutors). This methodology does not permit a systematic quantitative analysis but is extremely helpful in understanding the world through the eyes of the people themselves. Interviews were not led by presumptions of the researcher but by what was brought up in the conversation by the people themselves. This ethnographic approach is ideal for finding unexpected relations and interpret answers in wider contexts.

The reactions of our interlocutors to the researcher were mixed. Some simply came to the food bike to empty their bucket and ignored him; others enjoyed the attention and happily made time for a talk. Some bias has inevitably slipped into our data, as we talked most to the people who had time to talk. However, such self-selection is no different to a survey using standard questionnaires. The ultimate test of qualitative research is not a randomized sample or large number of respondents but trust. We built up rapport by regular contacts and also by making a point of speaking to people when we happened to meet them at other locations, thereby demonstrating we took the relationship seriously.

The participant observation was conducted in two neighbourhoods. One is Thiemsland, a central neighbourhood with relatively expensive rented and owner-occupied apartments. A large majority of the inhabitants – as well as the participants – are native Dutch who are retired or close to retirement. The other is Hengelose Es, a neighbourhood of mostly cheap rental apartments, which has a more varied age distribution and a larger share of people with a migrant background. This composition is reflected in the population attending the food bikes, although in Hengelose Es also the majority of the participants were in the second half of their lives. By choosing these two neighbourhoods, we have proxied a cross-section of the total population of Hengelo.

In addition, we both conducted interviews with the alderman, the civil servants in the municipal administration responsible for the waste management policy of Hengelo, and staff of a housing corporation (5 interviews in total). We also scanned the online local daily, *TC Tubantia*, which regularly publishes about the waste collection in Hengelo. A survey conducted by Krispijn Faddegon (Mulder et al., 2020) offered some complementary quantitative data. Finally, we were also contacted by citizens who are very critical of the municipal administration and of their own accord shared their views with us by email or phone (5 interviews). Using this triangulation of methods, we have gained a good overview of the way the food bike project is experienced by the participants.

## Self-interest and Idealism in the Food Bike Project

The two fundamental reasons people try to develop a sustainable lifestyle are: firstly self-interest and secondly idealism or the conviction that nature or the ecosystem has to be preserved and protected. Sociological and psychological research has developed models to show how these reasons interact with multiple factors, including antecedent and intervening variables, like age, education, religious convictions *et cetera* (Kollmus and Agyeman, 2002; Gifford and Nilsson, 2014). Self-interest and idealism also came to the fore in our research.

The alternative waste treatment systems of reversed collection and *diftar* also give a financial incentive to use the food bikes. When complying with the combined policy of reversed collection and *diftar*, people have to bring their waste to collective, subterranean containers. A maximum of 30 litres of waste can be deposited at a time and every time the chute of the container is used, a fee (of € 1.30 per 'click') has to be paid. If food waste is disposed of with the residual waste, the chute fills up more quickly and a click has to be paid more often. Moreover, if food waste is kept at home for too long, it begins to smell, so people feel forced to throw away waste (hence pay for a click) even before they have amassed enough waste to fill the full 30 litres. By participating in the food bike project people can kill two birds with one stone: food waste is removed before it begins to stink and the amount of residual waste which has to be paid for is reduced. This self-interest in joining the project was the factor which featured most prominently in our interviews. Saving money by having fewer 'clicks' was especially to the fore in Hengelose Es, where most people have a lower income than Thiemsland and where most households have more members (hence produce more waste). Similar self-interested motivations were also mentioned by people living in low-rise houses in the surrounding neighbourhood, who would love to participate or actually did participate, even though they were excluded from the project by the then formal rules. The occupants of these houses have outdoor private containers for organic waste, but also have to pay every time they choose to put the container out on the street for the garbage truck.

Both *diftar* and the food bikes appeal to people's self-interest but the food bike addresses peoples' self-interest in a positive way, by helping and facilitating them. This is in stark contrast to *diftar* which is experienced as a punishment by many citizens. Various people pointed out that they appreciated the food bike for this reason. One interlocutor was very upset about *diftar* because 'the municipal government only takes things away'. He would like to see the food bike expanded because, by taking this positive initiative, the municipality 'is finally doing something to help its citizens'.

Besides self-interest, idealistic motivations are also prominent. Participants who mention their convictions as the primary reason for their participation conceptualize the food bike as a move 'to close the circle'. However, the people driven by idealism usually connected their contribution more broadly, citing the current and future state of the environment and our planet. Various participants referred to topical issues which are hardly, if at all, related to separation of food waste, like the plastic soup in the oceans or plastic dumped in natural surroundings. These convictions were rarely purely eco-centric and many mentioned feelings of solidarity with future generations. Some also mentioned solidarity with humans who live in parts of the world in which the effects of climate change and overexploitation of resources are already much more visible than in Europe.

When the discussions with the participants deepened, the scale and complexity of the environmental and climate problems clearly emerged. These make it difficult for them to notice the immediate effects of their actions. But our findings also show that, even though their actions in themselves do not influence these issues directly, their perceived threats to these issues influenced the sense of urgency for their actions. As Henry, a participant from Thiemsland in his fifties, put it:

*'It is like a drop of water on a hot plate. If everyone begins to throw a drop on it, it will get cooler (...). And I don't think it should be an excuse to say, "If only I do it, it does not help..." If everyone keeps shouting that for sure nothing is going to change.'*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Names of our interlocutors are pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity; the original quotes were all in Dutch.



The enthusiasm with which they try to contribute contrasts with a scepticism, pessimism or even frustration about wider policies and structures and about more powerful but irresponsible actors. To begin with, some think that much of the waste they separate –especially non-organic recyclables– will be burnt together with the residual waste anyway (TC Tubantia 3-10-2018; TC Tubantia 17-10-2020). Moreover, many participants analyse waste management in a broader societal context. For instance, Erica, a woman in Thiemsland, who spontaneously joined the conversation we were having with a cyclist about the fact that companies are not obliged to separate their waste, added that this is exactly what was happening in hospitals too. She also thought it was weird that so many products come with seemingly unnecessary plastic packaging. *‘The companies don’t want to change’*, she told us. *‘Big companies have so much power (...) the government dances to their tune.’*

These insightful views from our interlocutors show that the idea prevalent among policy makers that people will act in a more pro-environmental way when they have been given more knowledge is not only naïve, it is downright paternalistic. Whose knowledge counts? Deeper insight could lead citizens to the conclusion that it is useless to recycle waste. Fortunately, despite this pessimism about wider policies and despite the uncertainty about the impact of their actions on the bigger picture, participants with pro-environmental motivations did stress the importance of making their contribution. Erica, for instance, concluded, *‘But alright. I want to do this. I think this is a good initiative and I would like to contribute.’*

So far, our findings support the hypothesis that self-interest and pro-environmental idealism lead people in the direction of pro-environmental behaviour and that such pro-environmental idealism and attitudes are developed through the imparting of knowledge to raise people’s awareness. While this is valid to a certain extent (as long as people overcome well-informed scepticism), we found that this conclusion is not sufficient to grasp the complex processes in which pro-environmental ideals and behaviour develop and are sustained by participants. In the next sections, we show how decisions to join the project are made in a multifaceted web of considerations.

## **A holistic View of the Construction of Motivations and Behaviour**

A survey conducted among participants in the food bike project found that 69 percent now separated food waste more regularly; 79 percent agreed with the statement that their knowledge about separating waste in general had increased, 79 percent reported that they dealt with their waste more consciously and 53 percent declared they separated other waste more often since they had participated in the food bike project (Mulder et al., 2020: 36). These figures are interesting but do not tell us how people integrate the handling of waste into their daily lives.

People make decisions on the basis of a fuzzy mix of conscious and unconscious arguments and emotions. We often found that, stimulated by our interview questions and trying to provide a clear explanation, the participants created an artificial order in the messy and complex processes in reaching decisions about participating or not. To paraphrase John Law (2004), our interlocutors *‘created order in reality’*. However, when we had longer conversations with the participants, it is precisely this complexity of multiple factors interrelating in their broader lives we encountered.

Initially, self-interest and environmental idealism often play a simultaneous role. Willem, a retired participant from a low-rise building in Hengelose Es, illustrated this perfectly by comparing his motivations for participating in the food bike project with participation in a lottery for a social cause: *‘I am not doing it for charity but because I also want to win something. However, it is nice that something good will come of it.’* Indeed, we often found that pro-environmental behaviour is seen not only in terms of a sacrifice and that the sense of doing good enhances people’s well-being. This satisfaction about how they live their lives –in the terminology of Kaida and Kaida (2016) a *‘consequent factor’*– is a form of self-interest and contributes to a sustained participation.

The interrelationships between factors are more complicated than just the combination of the self-interest and idealistic motivations discussed so far. Many factors simultaneously play a role and influence each other. For example, the just cited Willem gave a long explanation for using the food bike. He has a vegetable garden which produces a lot of garden waste. He takes this to the central municipal waste collection point by bike. Garden waste is not allowed on the food bike and should be disposed of in the organic waste container which Willem, who occupies a family dwelling, has. He has to pay the waste collection service every time he places his organic waste container on the street to be emptied. By taking the garden waste away to the municipal collection point, he saves money on having the container emptied. He chooses a bike to transport the garden waste because it is the most environmentally friendly to do so but also because he likes to ride his bike and, being retired, has time to do so. The flipside of taking his garden waste away is that he has little organic waste left to fill his organic waste container which therefore takes a long time to fill up. Consequently, the food residue begins to rot, which he dislikes not just because of the smell but also because he knows rotten food waste is less hygienic and not good for composting. Therefore, his antipathy to using the organic waste container for his food waste also has ideological roots. Moreover, he likes the idea that high quality compost will be processed from the food waste, meaning he can contribute to the circular economy. Ideally, he would like to compost it himself but he is afraid that this process would attract rats and bother his neighbours. Ideology and self-interest in various forms, plus some other factors – such as taking into account the neighbours – play a simultaneous role and interrelate in the context of his broader life.

We found other factors also play a role, some of which help to explain the overrepresentation of older people among the participants. A recurring explanation from older participants was that, now they are older, and especially when they have grandchildren, they begin to think more consciously about the state of the world for future generations and want to act responsibly. Moreover, they now have time to immerse themselves in it. As the bikes only collect during working hours, many people with a regular job are unable to participate for practical reasons.

This last point illustrates that, when the food bikes are contextualized in complete lives, there are not only multiple factors which motivate people to participate, but people also have other priorities. These priorities are frequently related to time and comfort. Moreover, there are things in their lives that they are not willing to give up, even if these are directly harmful to the environment. Even for highly motivated participants, other priorities sometimes prevail over their pro-environmental ambitions.

Therefore, many participants, also the idealistic ones, discard the food left-overs with the residual waste when it begins to smell. Other people who act pro-environmentally in other ways have chosen not to join because they are unable to fit in with the food bike schedule or found it too much trouble to obtain a bucket. People balance pro-environmental behaviour with other aspects of their lives and they are not easily prepared to shake up their whole lives for a better separation of organic waste. Many people combine pro-environmentalism with unsustainable patterns of behaviour. For example, Evelien, living in Hengelose Es, separates and recycles fanatically, but also produces unnecessary carbon dioxide by burning wood in her stove because she loves the warmth and ambiance. Henry, who as we have shown is quite idealistic, recycles zealously and also tries to limit his consumption, cannot resist taking his car out for the slightest reason and *'blasts it down the highway at 150 km/h'*. Although he feels guilty, he tells himself, *'I cannot do everything. And I don't want to do everything.'* How do the people explain, more to themselves than to us, these contradictory actions and reconcile them with their ideals? People want to do their share but on their own terms and not at the cost of everything else.

From these complicated patterns, we infer that people integrate environmental considerations into their broader lives and that state-run initiatives which focus narrowly on self-interest or idealism might be having little effect. Building up knowledge and awareness will make few inroads into these attitudes. Many people are already convinced of the urgency of doing something about environmental problems but simply make

different choices. A boost in knowledge can also lead to a critical attitude towards environmental policies and power relations. This attitude sometimes leads people to conclude that the negative impact of environmental actions on their individual lives is relatively larger than a positive impact on the ecosystem.

Nevertheless, in spite of these qualms, for many people pro-environmental behaviour is also part of the way they want to live their lives. New state initiatives can build on existing but often still latent idealism, if pro-environmental behaviour is facilitated in broader daily routines. Once new patterns of environmentally friendly behaviour have been ingrained into their lives, people will not easily fall back on old habits. This was explicitly stated by a participant from Hengelose Es, who told us that, now he has now begun separating the food residue, he feels he *'cannot go back'* and that he is paying more attention to the separation of other waste as well.

Self-interest and idealism are integrated into a web of considerations but the next sections shows that the decision to join the food bike project can also be taken for reasons other than the environment.

## **A Habitus of not wasting Food**

Sociological and psychological studies which try to build comprehensive models of pro-environmental behaviour always mention age as one factor but disagree about whether age has a positive or negative effect and are inconclusive on the reasons for a possible effect (López-Mosquera, Lera-López and Sánchez, 2015: 35; Li et al. 2019, 30). Robert Gifford and Andreas Nilsson (2014: 142, 146) argue that younger people are more concerned about the environment but that older people demonstrate more concrete pro-environmental behaviour. The finding that older people engage more in pro-environmental behaviour 'may support the hypothesis that something important happened to an older generation that did not happened to the younger generation. If so, such a cohort effect would not be caused by ageing itself, but by events that had a greater impact on one age group than another' (Gifford & Nilsson, 2014: 146). The Second World War and the decades after that might have been an historical period in which the older cohort learnt to be careful with resources. Another explanation might be the amount of time spent outdoors as a child and feeling connected to the immediate environment, which is less at the present day than in past times.

An examination of the food bike project shows there can be no doubt that elderly people were overrepresented and we have already given a clear explanation: they have more time during the morning hours in which the food bikes operate. Arguably even more important is that, during certain periods in the past, they have experienced scarcity, which made conservation behaviour necessary, and this experience has lingered on into the present. Berthouï also remarked that 'everyday life is influenced by habits, routines, [and] rituals' (Berthouï, 2013: 58). Such routines are based neither on ideology nor on self-interest but is better captured by Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. 'The *habitus* [...] ensures the active presence of past experiences, which deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action tend to guarantee the 'correctness' of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms.' Habitus as a learnt, embodied disposition for action is 'a present past that tends to perpetuate itself into the future by reactivation in similarly structured practices' (Bourdieu, 1990: 54). Bourdieu's hypothesis was that people who grow up under similar conditions, for instance, people from the same social class or the same era, develop a similar habitus.

We did indeed see this habitus reflected in the motivations of many older participants. Many older participants named saving money and not wasting food as important reasons for joining the food bike project, seeing it not so much as a matter of calculated self-interest. Willem illustrated this well, when we met him again after our interview, this time at the local repair café:<sup>7</sup>

*‘Well, I have been thinking about it. It is not because of the environment. Of course, it is good for it and that is fine. But I also think it is just a waste, of money... a real waste. An acquaintance of mine, for example, threw away a washing machine which was still working. I asked him why he was buying a new one? “Well”, he said, “it might not have broken down yet, but it will be soon...” I was astonished... I really don’t understand. That people discard something while it is still working properly. I think it is a waste.’*

This sort of an attitude transcends current circumstances and has roots in past experiences. The same can be said as a motivation for saving money. Although many of the older participants are currently not struggling to get by, they talked extensively about their youth in which wasting anything was not an option and they needed to be creative with what they had. We also noticed that many older people frequent the repair café in Hengelo, without any compelling financial need to do so.

This theory proposes that people are hardly aware of their habitus but our interlocutors, possibly triggered by our questions, proved quite conscious of their habitus (without, of course, using the term). A telling illustration of this habitus was provided by a participant from Thiemsland who told us that one way he could tell the difference between younger generations and his own is that, when peeling an apple or a potato, he peels it much more thinly than younger people usually do. We did indeed see that on average older participants hand over less food residue than younger ones. It seems the values and habits from the past have lingered on into the present and to have become important in themselves.

## **A Sense of Belonging: Social and emotional Aspects of the Food Bike**

It is also helpful to think of a ‘sense of belonging’ as a motivating factor in itself. People can display pro-environmental behaviour not because they strongly believe in the ideological or self-interested need for it but because they want to show their attachment to a group of people who demonstrate pro-environmental behaviour. Berthoû has theorised this sense of belonging: ‘Shared understandings, or shared practices, is not just another way of saying that individuals are doing the same things but rather that human beings are oriented towards each other’ (Berthoû, 2013: 65).

In our research this attachment to a group of people was a localized emotion, focused on the neighbourhood. This sense of belonging works not only as a consequent factor but can also be an antecedent factor which stimulates people to adopt the new behaviour. Some participants told us that, initially, they had not really considered joining the project, despite knowing what it was about, but decided to do so after being encouraged by neighbours.

Social factors came out clearly in a survey conducted among participants: 68 percent of the respondents have experienced more contact with their neighbours as a result of the food bike; 42 percent feel more connected to their neighbourhood because of the food bike project; and 28 percent stated that their social network in the neighbourhood has grown (Mulder et al., 2020: 36).

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<sup>7</sup> At a repair cafe volunteers try to repair broken objects for free or a minimal remuneration; they are usually only open once or twice per month. Repair cafes are another means to achieve a circular economy.

Our qualitative data make clear how these statistics should be interpreted. These social aspects have merits beyond pro-environmental behaviour and are valuable in themselves. For example, people brought the buckets of neighbours who were unable to do this themselves, either because of their age or because they had to go to work during the food bike hours. One man, when he greeted another man passing by, explained: *‘Something like this, for example. This man is from Turkey and barely speaks any Dutch, but he is always very friendly. You don’t need to have a long conversation but when we meet at the food bike we always greet and have some contact.’* Another participant in Hengelose Es particularly stressed the importance of the food bikes for the social cohesion of the neighbourhood. He once sent away someone from another neighbourhood who had been trying to dump bulky waste in Hengelose Es.

The sense of belonging and the sense of doing good were not limited to the environmental effect but also affected people’s social world. Various participants like the fact that the project helps people who have difficulty breaking into the labour market. One participant recalled how moved she was when at the annual open day of the Groentuin, the garden of the sheltered workshop, one of the workers told her: *‘It is so good that you are participating, because otherwise I might no longer have any work.’*

The citizens participating in the food bike project not only believe they are contributing to this social cause indirectly by the creation of work, but also directly through their interaction with the cyclists. Most people at least greet or thank the cyclist. Frequently this initial contact is followed by a small chat, often about the weather, the news or waste. In Thiemsland especially, this small talk can develop into longer conversations. The residents in Thiemsland, the large majority of whom are retired, have more time; moreover, there is no language barrier like that which exists in Hengelose Es, where some migrants have limited proficiency in Dutch; for his part the cyclists, who during the time of our research were often present in Thiemsland, also happened to be more of an extravert. Henry described the gratifying interaction with one of them in a few words:

*‘I see the cyclist have a chat with everyone [...] Doesn’t this cheer you up? Don’t you get a fresh lease of life because of it? [...] Just look at this man smiling as he chats with the people.’*

The sense of purpose goes both ways. While the cyclists enjoy the interactions, they also feel that they are important to some – especially elderly – participants. One of the cyclists, for example, said that he enjoys standing at a certain spot because there is a bench next to it on which – especially during the summer – elderly people frequently sit down to have a chat. He went on to say that he thinks it is important to talk to people and support those who need it.

These interactions can lead to a sense of connection and can sometimes take an unexpected turn. One cyclist recalled that an older participant with whom he sometimes chatted sighed she did not know how to install her Internet connection. He gave her his phone number so she could call him and eventually together they managed to find a solution to the Internet connection. When a little later he did not show up for a while because of an injury, the woman called him again to ask why he was not there and when he would be back.

Although contacts usually do not go as far as this, it was certainly not the only time that residents expressed regret at missing the usual cyclist when he or she was not there, because they enjoy the interaction with the cyclists. We noted various expressions of caring for and connectivity with the cyclist, in which appreciation for the environmental effect of the project is also reflected, albeit perhaps indirectly. We observed and also heard that participants brought the cyclists sweets and other snacks during holidays. We also observed that Henry brought the cyclist coffee when it was cold outside and heard from the cyclist that a woman at the shopping centre in Hengelose Es sometimes comes out of her shop to smoke a cigarette and have a coffee with him.

Of course, it is not only the interactions between the cyclist and participants which are appreciated for various reasons, the same can be said about the interactions among the neighbours. New arrivals are welcome to join the discussion between cyclists and participants and sometimes these talks develop into longer conversations. One of the cyclists in Thiemsland said that, especially during the summer, neighbours gather around the food bike and can sometimes easily talk for fifteen minutes or so.

These social considerations are hardly mentioned as the first step in taking environmental action and, of course, nobody joined the food bike project to seek, for instance, IT-assistance. However, when our discussions continued these social factors came out clearly and occasionally dominated the participants' food bike experience.

The social factor can feed back into the willingness to separate carefully. We observed cyclists giving subtle, informal and friendly advice on waste issues and cyclists who sometimes complimented participants when they handed in less. We once observed a cyclist giving a participant some tips about limiting the food waste and challenged him to hand in less next time; a challenge that he accepted and met. Moreover, the cyclists add to what Jane Jacobs (1961) has famously called 'eyes on the street'. The presence of a cyclist makes it almost impossible for residents to litter and, when this does happen, the cyclist has time to remove the litter. The personal control makes it possible to operate protocols with some leniency without letting the situation get out of hand, for example, when people bring more than one bucket of organic waste. Too strict a control of the protocols could dampen residents' enthusiasm and have a negative effect on the functioning of the system.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This article is the first comprehensive study of an interesting experiment in pro-environmental behaviour, the food bikes in Hengelo. Idealism and self-interest –two cognitive factors explaining pro-environmental behaviour known from literature– have played a role in the acceptance of food bikes. Our ethnographic approach sheds light on how idealism and self-interest can be contextualized in the everyday practice and are mingled with more varied considerations. It became clear that the food bike project plays on self-interest in a positive manner because it helps citizens with any problem they encounter first hand (paying a 'click' at the collective chute and the stench of rotting food); consequently, the food bike project has enjoyed a more positive reception than either *diftar* or reversed collection, which also address the self-interests of citizens but by punishing them for non-compliance.

Our qualitative research has also shed light on two other factors, which are far less prominent in sociological and psychological literature because these factors operate on a more subconscious level. Firstly, older people take part in the project because the food bikes suit their habitus of frugality. They 'just' do not want to waste food. Secondly, a sense of belonging played an important role. Some persons joined because they wanted to behave in a socially desirable way in the eyes of their neighbours, but also because they enjoyed the interaction around the food bikes and felt good about the social effect of helping the cyclists, people with a distance to the labour market. The social interaction at the food bikes is in marked contrast to the collection of waste by garbage trucks in which contact is avoided as much as possible.

Follow-up observations and interviews during the Corona period confirmed these patterns. During the first Corona wave, the food bikes did not work for six months, after which the project restarted, expanded and kept going through the second wave in the winter of 2020/2021. All the people we spoke to discarded their food waste with the residual solid waste for as long as the food bikes did not operate. They were annoyed by the smell at home and the higher cost of disposing of the increased residual household waste.

This time of deprivation led to the extra appreciation of the food bikes and the motivation to separate waste. However, the discontinued and then restarted separation of food waste also signals that a top-down facility is necessary to address the latent motivations of citizens to separate their waste.

The social aspect has acquired a new layer during the Corona crisis when social contact was discouraged by the Dutch government. People visibly enjoyed the interaction, as some participants remained and chatted around the food bike, joked with the cyclist and walked to, or from, the bikes together with their neighbours. A woman in her eighties from Thiemsland summed it up nicely: *'I still have plenty of family who visit and look after me. But some persons have been much lonelier during this period [than I am]. For them it is even more important and I also see that these are the people who go looking more [for the food bike].'* And a participant from Hengelose Es in his seventies responded enthusiastically to the question of whether he enjoys the chats at the food bike: *'Yes, especially now! Because of the Corona virus I am nearly always stuck at home, I barely go anywhere and hardly speak to anyone.'*

We feel that these insights can lead to minor interventions which could make the food bike project an even bigger success than it is. The municipality could address the older generation with reference to their habitus of not throwing things away. By and large, older generations are sometimes depicted as old-fashioned or out-of-touch with the world today. In terms of being prudent with scarce resources for the sake of the ecosystem, such rather derogatory characterizations are totally undeserved. The older population does not have to be reminded of their own values but can also serve as a role model for younger generations.

The social factor can be exploited by facilitating social interaction in the neighbourhood. Food bikes should stop at places with benches or trees which give protection from rain, sun and wind (or if this infrastructure is missing the vegetation and necessary street furniture can be placed to create such inviting social space). If the collection time is once a week moved to after office hours, more people could participate and people might spend more time socializing at the bikes. Moreover, the municipal policy of somewhat downplaying the fact that the cyclists are people with a distance to the labour market should be reversed. The food bike is an exemplary opportunity to drum up more attention for them and to integrate this group of people into the 'participation society'. Just playing the trump card of self-interest or ideals might be an unnecessary restriction of policy makers.

## **Postscript**

By the time we concluded this manuscript, the sad news reached us that the municipality will discontinue the food bikes and replace them by containers for organic waste on 1 July 2023. Needless to say that we regret the wasting of such a fine project. And for the food bikes themselves there is no mechanism in place to recycle the idea.

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## **Ethics declaration**

We declare that the research meets the ethical guidelines of the Ethical Review Board of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

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# Solid waste recycling in the Netherlands: ethnography of the circular economy

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## **Abstract**

The theme of this article is the recycling of solid waste as a dynamic process for the circular economy. We approach classic and recent studies that consider the contradictions in the industrial and so-called modern world regarding the exhaustion of abusive consumption practices to the environment. We present an ethnographic study developed in the Netherlands, focusing on a case study in Zaandam in 2019 and a study with recycling companies in 2021. In our ethnography with companies, we started with questions about the business logic of these industries, the origin of their materials, and the destination of their products. We also covered how residents of the Netherlands recycle and how they perceive recycling policies.

**Key words:** circular economy, recycling, ethnography, garbage, Netherlands.

# Reciclagem de Resíduos Sólidos nos Países Baixos: etnografia da economia circular

## Resumo

O presente artigo se dedica à análise da reciclagem de resíduos sólidos como um processo dinâmico integrado na economia circular. Exploramos tanto estudos clássicos quanto pesquisas recentes que enfocam as contradições do mundo industrial moderno em relação ao esgotamento de práticas de consumo prejudiciais ao meio ambiente. Apresentamos os resultados de uma pesquisa etnográfica realizada na Holanda, concentrando-nos em um estudo de caso em Zaandam, conduzido em 2019, e em uma investigação junto a empresas de reciclagem, realizada em 2021. Em nossa abordagem etnográfica com as empresas, inicialmente investigamos questões relacionadas à lógica de negócios dessas indústrias, a origem de seus materiais e o destino de seus produtos. Além disso, examinamos o processo de reciclagem adotado pelos residentes dos Países Baixos e suas percepções em relação às políticas de reciclagem em vigor.

**Palavras-chave:** economia circular, reciclagem, etnografia, lixo, Holanda.

# Solid waste recycling in the Netherlands: ethnography of the circular economy

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## **Inconvenient theories**

Our purpose in this text was to think about the circular economy and the recycling of solid waste in its practice in the Netherlands. The account and analysis of this ethnographic experience should be accompanied by the visualization of the visual narrative that is presented in this dossier under the title “A Photographic Essay on Solid Waste Recycling: Street Ethnography and Innovative Experiences in the Netherlands”.

Few would doubt today that the reuse of waste is a central problem worldwide. But it has already been considered a dangerous topic for the human sciences. Freud warned us when he said that “Science has not been allowed to concern itself with these proscribed aspects of human life, so that anyone who studies these things will be considered as just a little less inconvenient than one who does really inconvenient things” (Freud, 1981: 33).

Let us make a brief theoretical *détour*. The second half of the last century was fruitful in social movements and theories of “inconvenients” that aimed to provide emergency responses to the dramatic panorama of environmental conditions at a planetary level. In the wave of dialectical theories, environmental laws emerged to respond to the immense contradictory process of the effects of the capitalist world and consumption and the clamor for environmental and social justice, even if timid and incipient.

Studies proliferate on the harmful effects of accelerated economic development and the wear and tear of natural resources. New areas of study, such as ecology and the environment, have boosted the concept of urgency in nature conservation. The fit between development and environmental protection resulted in “sustainable development” (Dumont, 1973), highlighting the contradictory process of the global evolution of production modes and consumption practices.

If we were to make a genealogy of those who were concerned with ecology, with the cleaning of our home in the world, perhaps we would have to go back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau the walking philosopher; to John Muir, the pioneer of natural parks and the protection of wild places; to Rachel Carson, the marine biologist and conservationist who announced the pesticide disaster, whose influential book *Silent Spring* (1962) is credited with advancing the global environmental movement; to the Australian researchers Bill Mollison and David Holmgren who coined the word “permaculture” in the 1970s by merging the terms “permanent” and “agriculture”; to André Gorz, the Austrian and French philosopher-journalist so concerned with political ecology; and to get to Isabel Stengers and her proposition of Cosmopolitics, a key aspect of the “progressive composition of a common world” in which the non-human and the human are intimately entangled; to Donna Haraway who criticizes anthropocentrism and emphasizes the self-organizing powers of non-human processes; to the geochemist Paul Crutzen and the biologist Eugene Storer who proposed to baptize “Anthropocene” (from the ancient Greek anthropos meaning “man”, and scene meaning “new”) or Bruno Latour, thinker of the Anthropocene, de la “Grande Acceleration”, with his idea of habitability.

In Brazil, we have to go back to the visionary José Lutzemberger, who already in the 1970s warned of the danger of gases affecting the ozone layer; to Marina Silva, the protectress of forests; to Chico Mendes, killed for defending the Amazon; and so many indigenous people – for instance, to the Mayans notion of *buen vivir*, which nowadays seems more critical than ever and has been employed by many contemporary thinkers of the “modern” world.

Perhaps it is Georg Simmel’s concept of the tragedy of culture that best synthesizes the strength of the contradictions in the “modern” world, as inherent to culture and society in their complex ways of existing that depend on time. In this era of reciprocity, on different scales, consumption is exacerbated as a global phenomenon, “not necessarily good or bad, but intrinsically contradictory” (Miller, 2013: 96). According to Simmel’s theory of forms, individuals create products and their forms, of multiple natures, forms that escape and abandon their creator for the enjoyment of consumers. The product surpasses and can dissolve the life that generated it, even losing the principle of life: the tragedy then consists in the attitude of the living to produce the non-living” (Freund, 1992: 221-222).

We can now argue about the industrial products that generated pollution, depletion, and destruction of life, promoting “planetary agony” (Morin, 1997: 60). The challenge for the modern individual to overcome the tragedy of the production of non-life is to generate life without forms or, we can suggest, a world where forms, products, are trans-formed, trans-figured, and return to the life cycle. In fact, Freund understands that tragedy is no longer in question. Still, the crisis that contradictorily generates new forms of life, understanding the crisis of modern culture as the will to overcome the tragedy inherent in the culture, “c’est-à-dire son essence qui reside dans sa faculté de produire en tant que vie des formes non-vivantes” (Freund, 1992: 222). We can now convey the theme of garbage as a lifeless product, rejected in the consumption cycle and reoriented as an asset to be recycled within the scope of the global ecological crisis. Solid waste, as a non-perishable matter and losing its original functionality, is promoted to new forms within the scope of environmental policies, reintegrated into the social fabric through the metamorphosis of recycling, and reconfigured in new development models such as the circular economy.

We are thus articulating the theme of sustainable development with the circular economy in the anthropological field. Garbage, meanwhile, has interested anthropology to the extent that the environmental issue has become relevant in the last century. One of the important manifestations in the 1980s came with the publication of *Risk and Culture* by Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky (1983), arguing about the risks in modernity as a social process and the fears related to vulnerability. As Julia Guivant (1998) rightly observes, one of the merits of this pioneering work is to have brought the theme of risk to the scope of the political and moral debate.

Placed under the spotlight, the risks of environmental degradation are taken seriously within anthropocosmological paradigms, as in the work of Edgar Morin, which relates the human phenomenon intrinsically related to nature from the biological and ecological perspective. Morin proposes the paradigm of complexity in the face of the threat of destruction of life in local ecosystems through the degradation of the biosphere and the death of planetary nature. It is a reform of the structures of consciousness itself (Morin, 1980) incorporating, to reflective development, the anthropo-social dimension (Morin, 1973) based on the notion of self-eco-organization: “it is a paradigm that inserts an order in another order and so on, in a reciprocal and recursive way” (Morin, 1997: 63). The environment is no longer restricted solely to the determinisms and conditioning of the environment, nor to risks and devastation, but also as an organization that “like any complex organization, suffers, behaves and produces disorder and order”, an eco-organization (Morin, 1980: 19). Pena-Vega (2003) adds: “therefore, permanent disorganization/reorganization is a constitutive character of living organization.” In this sense, there is a convergence of complexity theory with Maturana, Varela,

and Uribe's theory of *autopoiesis* on self-production in a critique of "industrial subjectivity, manufactured and shaped by capitalism" (Pena-Vega, 2003: 87)<sup>1</sup>.

It is a question of enunciating the hologramatic principle in ecological thinking, in which the organization of the outside is also inside; the organization of the macrocosm is also in the microcosm; the part is in the whole and the whole in the part (Morin, 1997: 64). A principle of dynamic retroactivity that can also be operationalized with Gregory Bateson's theory of schismogenesis (1977), allowing us to recognize environmental problems and understand how the involved social actors act in this process.

In this scenario, new sustainable development policies emerge, such as the debate on climate risk and the concern with excessive waste, especially in Europe. The circular economy is therefore conceived as a policy of responsibility designed from a critical perspective on the depletion of the biosphere, as pointed out by theories of the Anthropocene that authors such as Bruno Latour address on biopolitics. We enter ethical and moral arguments about the limits a consumer society operates and its responsibility for sustainability. For Latour (2022):

"the concept of Anthropocene introduces us to a third feature that has the potential to subvert the whole game: to claim that human agency has become the main geological force shaping the face of the earth, is to immediately raise the question of 'responsibility', or as Donna Haraway is fond of saying, 'response ability'."

The appreciation of the circulation of objects, central to material culture, is resumed under a dialectical view, conceiving that "the whole system of things, with its internal order, makes us the people that we are." (Miller, 2013: 83). In his study *Trecos, troços e coisas, estudos antropológicos sobre a cultura material*, anthropological studies on material culture, Miller, following the influence of Bourdieu, relate consumption to habitus. On the other hand, he follows Hegel's phenomenology. He takes his concept of objectification in which he understands that humanity develops ways in which it comes to apprehend itself and to develop a world following its perception of reason. However, each of these developments changes our consciousness and allows us to conceive further developments (Miller, 2013: 88). In our relationship with objects, the produced thing can develop its own autonomous interests (p. 91). In this way, products can generate harmful conditions for humanity, such as garbage accumulation and pollution. Still, they can simply become part of who we are and, in this sense, carry a beneficial and friendly value (p. 92). Assunção (2016: 108-109) shows that Miller does not necessarily see consumption as alienating, as "it can be a tool that people use to fight alienation and deny capitalism in their daily practices", and it is in this sense that Miller conceives a positive relationship in a sustainability policy that does not deny the existence of consumer goods. After all, as Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood had already shown in *O Mundo dos Bens*, consumption is a cultural action that constitutes our reality, present in our daily lives. It plays a structuring role in our identities, regulating social relations, and defining cultural maps. (Douglas and Isherwood, 2006: ch. 3).

Garbage is materially refuted for its value for domestic or public use (Rial 2016). But within a new world order, waste is reconfigured into new reuse and recycling values. Solid waste, as objects, comes to life in circulation motivated by a renewed economy.

<sup>1</sup> Autopoiesis conceives a biology of knowing, "a way of seeing the phenomenology of living beings in general and human beings in particular". In other words, it is an "explanation of what living is, and, at the same time, an explanation of the phenomenology observed in the constant becoming of living beings in the domain of their existence" (Pena-Vega, 2003: 87).



## Anthropology of the Circular Economy

Environmental degradation is the priority theme in political projects in the face of sustainability programs. Convergent with the “brown agenda”, the circular economy implies long-term systemic transformations with productivity on the one hand and social and environmental benefits on the other.

What does the circular economy consist of? By circular economy, we mean here:

“an economy that uses a systems-focused approach and involves industrial processes and economic activities that are restorative. It is a change to the model in which resources are mined, made into products, and then become waste. A circular economy recaptures ‘waste’ as a resource to manufacture new materials and products.” (Save Our Seas, 2022).

The challenge of ethnographing the transitional processes in obtaining clean energy involved paying attention to investments of profitable companies and private households searching for more stability, security, and well-being. In the original research project that resulted in the study missions in Netherlands and Brazil, the theme of politics was central, focusing on the relationships between income, pollution, and environmental behavior involving recycling and reusing waste. Our questions turned to the observation and analysis of advances in the clean environmental policy and the gains surrounding the management of the recycling market, which corresponds to the implementation of the *brown agenda*<sup>2</sup> that regularizes environmental protection (Rial and Colombijn, 2016). The Brazilian researchers involved in the project developed their research in this bilateral perspective, proposing ethnography in Brazil and Netherlands<sup>3</sup>. This opportunity allowed us to observe and reflect on a lived context and its waste management policy, which we aim to report here.

Solid waste collection, such as those studied by Freek Colombijn and Martina Morbidini (2016), can involve garbage pickers organized in cooperatives and acts to reduce poverty and protect the environment (2016: 43). However, it is also important to inquire about the policy conducted by the companies that recycle.

We followed in on our ethnographic adventure in the Netherlands, the suggestions of Freek Colombijn. The Dutch anthropologist who researches recycling plastics and other waste recycling companies argues that contrary to the significant number of studies on recycling, especially on the work of garbage pickers, few studies deal with business companies. In Colombijn’s case study, the research universe is located in Indonesia. He asks about: 1) what is the business logic of these industries? 2) Where do their materials come from? 3) How do the materials used by these industries affect the production process? 4) What kind of products do they manufacture? 5) To whom do they sell their products? (Colombijn, 2020.)

We were interested in researching recycling companies, so this script was appropriate with some particularities. The fieldwork was conducted in the Netherlands in December 2021 with recycling companies, public institutions, domestic units, and collection points (afvalbrengrstations). We also report here our case study in Zaandam, developed in December 2019, where we delve into the daily life of the small town in the north of Amsterdam. The ethnography in Zaandam aimed to answer questions about sociotechnical innovations (Latour, 2005) in different generations and the consolidation of recyclable material processing industries that seek to insert themselves into a circular economy.

With a late entry into the mandatory domestic recycling policy aiming at sustainable development, the Netherlands is currently one of the most important reference centers for policies for treating organic and solid waste, but it is experiencing severe issues.

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<sup>2</sup> The “brown agenda” refers to priorities and measures aimed at avoiding, reducing, or controlling polluting activities.

<sup>3</sup> The Dutch researchers extended their studies to regions in Asia, mainly in Indonesia, under the coordination of Freek Colombijn (VU, Amsterdam).

## The Netherlands as a circular economy reference in the “European recycling player”

Sustainability policies can be considered a visiting card of the Netherlands. We witnessed scenes in the routine of the city of Amsterdam, where children on a boat, carrying lifesaving bags, held a collector in their hand (net or strainer), with which they “fished” for the garbage that floated in the canal. Adults in guidance vests accompanied them. There was not much waste at first glance, but there were a few bottles, cans, plastic bags, and cups that the young solid waste fishermen collected. The inscription on the vessel announced that it belonged to the *Plastic Whale* institution.

Visiting the *Plastic Whale* website<sup>4</sup> is to find the leitmotiv of the NGO: “We Collect, We Create, We Educate”. As it said, it aimed at information and training in recycling and construction projects with recycled materials. *Plastic Whale* is not alone. NGOs such as *Greenpeace* and *Ocean Cleanup*<sup>5</sup> also work in the Netherlands to collect plastic in the oceans, in addition to campaigning for the closure of sources of plastic pollution. The political action of these NGOs also focuses on creating marine reserves in international waters based on the Global Ocean Treaty.

Plastic collection in the Netherlands (and everywhere else) has become one of the great undertakings of the circular economy. It seeks to remove waste from the garbage category for the economical use circuit, reusing or promoting new uses, avoiding the excess production of plastics. Europe’s goal<sup>6</sup> is to ban the production of plastics.

In the Netherlands, we observe government programs such as the *Van Afval Naar Grondstof*, the VANG<sup>7</sup>, which means “from waste to raw material”. VANG – Domestic Waste (HHA) is a policy program designed to help municipalities take the necessary steps toward a circular economy. The goal for the whole of the Netherlands is to be fully circular by 2050. The economic investment in waste separation and the quality of sub-flows is large. The VANG-HHA program covers the period 2015-2025. The ambition was to achieve 75% of waste separation and 100Kg waste per inhabitant by 2020. This objective was not achieved. However, municipalities have taken significant steps to improve the separation of household waste.

## A journey through the Dutch circular economy

The field trip to the ethnography of Dutch companies and entrepreneurs was scheduled for 2020 under the Capes/Nuffic project<sup>8</sup>. Due to the pandemic, the mission was transferred to 2021. Respecting vaccination protocols and the use of masks, our move from Brazil to the Netherlands took place in early December. The internship-work in the Netherlands, as on other occasions, began with a meeting between the project coordinators at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Next, we started the circuit of visits to get to know more closely previously mapped solid waste recycling companies that are part of a circular economy policy. Initially, we dedicated ourselves to visiting companies in Holland, in the North/West of the Netherlands (Zaandam, Rotterdam, Leiden, Amsterdam), leaving the last week to visit companies in the Center (Eindhoven) and South before returning to the North (Groening). From the outset, it was clear to us that, in addition to companies, we should seek to interview residents of private homes to learn about their recycling, consumption, disposal practices, and other domestic activities such as composting and gardening.

4 <https://plasticwhale.com/> Consulted on 23 August 2019.

5 <http://www.theoceancleanup.com> Consulted 8 December 2022

6 <https://www.dw.com/pt-br/o-que-muda-na-ue-com-a-proibição-dos-artigos-de-plástico/a-58146884>. Consulted 8 December 2022.

7 <https://vang-hha.nl/programma/> Consulted 10 dezembro 2021

8 Project “Circular economy: garbage/solid waste anthropologies and innovative experiences between Holland and Brazil”, between the Federal University of Santa Catarina, Florianópolis (SC), Brazil and VU Vrij University Amsterdam, Holland coordinated by Carmen Rial and Freek Colombijn. Researchers from other institutions at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (Cornelia Eckert), the Federal University of Latin American Integration (Barbara Arisi), UNIVALE (Margarete Nunes), and the Universidad de la República (Luciano Jahnecka) participated in it.

We settled in Abbenes<sup>9</sup>, in the residence of Judith van de Meerendonk who would become an important interlocutor. From there, we visited companies dedicated to recycling plastics that reverted into gas and construction products. These companies recover sorted paper by manufacturing new packaging and recycling bio-waste for agronomic recovery, but also green waste transformed into agricultural correctives to feed the soil.

Recommended by Judith and her husband, we started our investigation at a nearby company, *Recycling NL Brantjes*. Despite the kindness at the reception, we did not obtain information about the company's operation, which, we observed, consists of receiving solid waste collection trucks. The traffic of trucks was heavy and dangerous in the place. Right at the entrance, the heavy trucks parked at the scale for weighing and proceeded to dispatch waste in large pavilions. According to the flyers we were given at the office, the company's priority was the recycling service for files, papers, clothes, computers, accessories, etc. The folders stated that a company provided high-quality recycling of shredded paper and other waste materials. What immediately caught our attention was the large presence of Renewi trucks (a private garbage collection and processing company), which we already knew from the field research in 2019 in the Netherlands, as we will report later.

In Rotterdam<sup>10</sup>, we went to visit the small company *GroenCollect*. The company's motto can be seen on a board at the entrance: "from bread to fuel, from vegetables to raw materials". We explained the reason for the contact and asked for an interview with the firm's director. The businessman received us and asked for some time to prepare. While we were waiting, it was possible to photograph the courtyard and the office's interior. Soon we were invited for coffee in the meeting room and to proceed with the interview.

The owner of *GroenCollect*, 40 years old, decided to create the company to process methane gas after having had an experience in Vietnam where he went to gather data to write a paper for the Graduation course. However, installing a methane gas processor would require a very high loan, and no bank would give it; he was advised to start with another type of recycling. Now, he told us he is doing well and does not think about changing.

In the room where he received us, there were pictures with sayings such as "with garbage, we heat buildings". A young employee who was having lunch when we arrived brought the coffee. The CEO introduced us to his employee as a Portuguese speaker, an immigrant from Cape Verde. We took a picture with him on the way out and exchanged a few words in Portuguese.

The company's objective, reported the CEO, is to invest in food waste - they collect stale bread, vegetables, fruits, coffee grounds, and food scraps to be transformed into biogas. Other edible residues, such as mushrooms, and oysters, can be transformed into bioplastics. They only recycle waste from restaurants and small businesses as it is forbidden to collect waste from private homes. They carry out the gathers with small electric trucks to reduce the environmental impact. But they collect for themselves and sell to other companies that work with the same infrastructure, allowing an efficient flow of waste. He reported that *GroenCollect* operates in several Dutch cities and tends to expand. For our interviewee, reuse in the human food chain, reverting to material or energy, is a vision of the future.

Our fieldwork was executed during the pandemic. We wore a mask all the time, but the CEOs and employees no longer wore it, explaining that non-use was allowed for those vaccinated in the Netherlands. We thanked him for the interview and followed the itinerary to take advantage of the afternoon shift.

In Rotterdam, we researched two other recycling companies that invest in the reuse of plastics. Both occupy warehouses in the port area. At *UrbanMinigCorp*, we met an employee who showed us some products that result from the reuse of plastics, little colorful smithereens.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.google.com/maps/@52.2324561,4.5664117,13z>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.google.com.br/maps/@51.927903,4.3507457,11z>

The many tons of plastic to be reused occupied most of the warehouse in huge containers. At the neighboring company, *Plasticiet*, plastic waste filled a large open-air tank. The plastic smell was strong. An employee dressed in overalls received us and directed us to a container rearranged to be an office. One of the young CEOs agreed to receive us and grant an interview. So, comfortably seated and permeated by the strong smell of plastics, the businessman told us about the objectives and functioning of the company that works with polystyrene for shredding and thermal recycling. On the shelf were exposed pieces of recycled solid surface panels and large tiles of different colors. The CEO explained that their proposal converges with the circular economy of creating a post-waste world. He explained that all products result from 100% recycled waste. From refrigerator scrap or post-production leftovers, they produce very rigid plates that imitate nature, such as granite, stones, etc., and are suitable for use in construction. Other, more colorful signs result from recycling white refrigerators and Belgian household waste. And finally, a board with chocolate color results from the transformation of molds from an old chocolate factory. Showing proudly the plastic plates that resulted from recycling, he clarified the different possible uses. The products resulted can also, in turn, be recycled for other uses.

With the motto “Reduce - recycle - reuse - repeat”, the company invests in producing recycled plastics with bold designs collaborating in “sustainable ways of living and building”. The staff employs designers, architects, and artists committed to sustainable projects – some of them were present in the small space of the container, sharing the long bench with us. Interestingly, despite sharing the same street, this company’s owner was unaware of the existence of the first company we visited there. All those interviewed at these companies were very young, around 25 or so.

Once these three visits were successful, we continued in the following days. On the way to Utrecht in Amersfoort, we stopped at the address we had for a building material reuse company. We found a very elegant house, two floors. But on the intercom, no one answered. A young man who spoke English with difficulty opened the door for us, perhaps seeing through the window that we were there. Very kind and friendly, he told us that what we were looking for was located upstairs. A gentleman came out of another carpeted room (we later found out to be a law office) and had a few words with him, and we understood that he told him to accompany us upstairs, as he did. He knocked, tried to open one of the white doors, and ended up saying there was really no one there.

In Woudenberg (East of Utrecht), it was possible to get to know a micro-enterprise, *DutchFiets*, with a concrete proposal of a circular economy with the production of bicycles from recyclable products. A company of two young brothers who are partners, sons of a window cleaner, and very suspicious of our presence. Although we already knew some information on the project’s website, they did not want to prolong the interview. We could only observe the bike in the testing phase and the machinery used to manufacture it. At the time, we wrote in the diary:

“We found the place thanks to the car’s navigation system, which has been the most efficient search tool, along with the all-purpose iPhone. A Van with the company’s name and the sign on the door ensured that it was the place. A UPC (mail delivery company) truck pulled up in front and began unloading large packages. We entered the open door and saw that there were some colorful bicycles in the room to the right of the entrance, whose door was also ajar. We went in and filmed a machine that was turning (it looked more like a large dough drainer than an industrial machine). All too fast. Down the narrow staircase – the whole place was very narrow, normal in houses in the Netherlands – a young man who looked more like a boy to us descended. Benjamim, 25 years old, blond, and with lively eyes, a face that reddened showing his emotions. He received us with joy: “ah, it was you who wrote the letter”. “Yeah”; we said, “we wanted to talk, do a quick interview”. “Oh yes, let’s go upstairs.” And there we went on the steep stairs to the second floor, where his brother was waiting for us, with a different tone of voice and an Ipad in his hand showing what I thought was a spreadsheet. “No, we can’t now, we have a very tight schedule today, we have an operation in progress and we can’t stop to talk”. “But maybe you could continue the operation,

we stay here and just watch” we tried to negotiate. “No, it is not possible. Come back in half an hour. Can you come back in half an hour?” That struck us as odd but half an hour was quite reasonable. In the room there was a wooden table, and another young man standing by it. It would have been better to just stay there and wait, but the tone of voice was very decided and we thought better not to insist. The afternoon was beautiful, and we could have tea in the car while we waited. We stopped on a street, right in front of a house that had a white banner with letters forming a sentence. We only understood the word “nee” and looked at the translation on Google. I could not believe what I read: “A second black country, nee – no!” That is, an anti-immigration slogan, a racist slogan. There, paisiblement in a garden, in front of a beautiful house, next door to one that had a green roof with moss, so ecologically correct.”

After 40 minutes, we knocked again on the door. Benjamim came but this time only halfway down the stairs and with a very different posture. He said he could not have us there, that they were busy. We said it would only be 10 minutes. But he was adamant, and it clearly was not for lack of time. He said that there were secret technological processes there, of which they could not talk.

- “What are you afraid of? We are anthropologists, we are not interested in technological processes”, we argued.

“We are interested in people, why they do what they do, how they got started... What’s your name?”

- “Afraid, I’m not afraid”. He said. We went on to ask how old the company was.

- “Three years old”. He said.

- Who is the guy we met, is your partner?

- “It is my brother,” he said.

- Your father must be proud then.

- “Yes, he is”.

- What your father does for a living?

- “He was a cleaner”.

- Cleaner? Streets cleaner?

- “No, buildings,” he replied.

- “Ah, so it was a big change, you guys made a business company”. We tried to make the conversation more cordial, but he was uncomfortable, he kept answering with monosyllables but showed signs of embarrassment and insisted that we send the questions by email.

- “But we wrote and you did not reply. Are you going to answer this time?” we request.

There was no point in continuing to ask questions under these circumstances. We went down a few steps, told him we would write and wait for an answer. We noticed that in addition to locking the door of the tire production room, they hid the bike that was on display at the entrance! Needless to add that the questionnaire we sent by email, in English and translated into Dutch, was never answered.

Later, we read on the website a scary phrase: “Dutch is also really Dutch. Not only is the material sustainable. Through local production and partners, *Dutchfiets* tries to keep its footprint as small as possible and to create employment for the Dutch labor Market”<sup>11</sup>.

The importance of the company lies above all in the high esteem that the bicycle has in the Dutch context that invests in this means of mobility to reduce pollution. A bicycle that results from a local circular economy is an example of the reuse of plastics to produce recycled products.

Still in the plastics sector, we interviewed the businessman Lars van Zutphen from the company *Morssinkhof-Rymoplast* with one of the headquarters in Lichtenvoorde that we visited, but it was closed, so we requested the interview via the Zoom platform.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.dutchfiets.nl/informatie-en-specificaties> consulted December 10th, 2022.

The art of plastic recycling has been a family project for at least three generations, explains Lars. It operates in the Netherlands and serves the European market, “from small companies in the plastics processing industry to the largest multinational corporations in the world”. Lars clarifies that they proceed with the purchase of plastic scrap from different sources and of four different types for sorting, grinding, purification, and revaluation, returning a high-quality material (polymer) to a new sustainable production cycle. The main concern of the company’s policy is to recycle plastics without loss of quality (mechanical and chemical systems), which creates respectability for the sustainable raw material offered in the market.

The idea of recycling came from the company’s founders (in 1960 by the brothers Gertie and Jan Morssinkhof). More recently, *Ingka Investments* (owner of IKEA<sup>12</sup>) bought a minority stake in *Morssinkhof-Rymoplast*. Favorable aspect for a company that invests in a clean and sustainable economy.

The next stop of our research took place in the city of Eindhoven. Before that, we once again had the opportunity to visit a *Renewi* warehouse in Rijtacker. An employee allowed us to enter, photograph and film, and informed us that the site was a solid waste deposit and belonged to *Holland Recycling*. In reality, we were in the territory of a powerhouse in terms of recycling dedicated to the reuse of electronic equipment or electronic waste. According to the folder passed on by the employee, the mega-company was created in 2010 and started with the recycling of metals but soon expanded its focus to the processing of electronic waste aimed at the flow of waste, and recycling of debris and metal. The company’s folder and website highlight the WEEELABEX certification, which became mandatory in the Netherlands in 2015. In 2015, the newly founded *Dutch Hardware Trading* (DHT), created to give electronic waste a second life, was also integrated into *Holland Recycling* under the name *Holland Recycling Re-use*. With this structure, it became a leader in Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE - Waste of Electrical and Electronic Equipment). Also associated with it are the *Brabant Environmental Service* (MSB), which acts as a carrier for *Holland Recycling* collecting waste, wood, green and construction and demolition waste, *Wagenaars*, which recycles rubble into granules, *Ecoparque Breda*, storage and transshipment of household waste, *GFT* and construction and demolition waste, and *Waste Connection*, which is a collective that mediates purchases that bring together supply and demand for various types of waste.

On this visit, the value of recycling electronic boards, called printed circuit boards, became evident. Electronics of the latest dates are ideal, but also old computers, laptops, cell phones, routers, modems, TV receivers, and other home and audio-visual equipment are prized for purchase as they all contain valuable metals such as gold<sup>13</sup>.

The *Soiltech* company we visited next is another world. It is located in the middle of the countryside between Tilburg and ‘s-Hertogenbosch and focuses on food. It seeks the highest yield of crops. We were received by one of its owners, Mark, who gave us a long interview and a lot of information material. The company is part of the *Van Iersel Holding*, which dates back to 1947, and it is also a family business - founded by his grandfather, now has his cousins and one nephew as partners. Specializing in manufacturing fertilizers and biostimulants that recycle organic waste, it has become a leading producer of soil improvers and raw materials for the potting soil industry. They invested in high technology and research (*Soiltech Innovation and Test Center*) to develop special fertilizers and produce concentrated foliar fertilizers.

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<sup>12</sup> IKEA is a designer furniture store at popular prices present in many countries of the global North

<sup>13</sup> It is also important to mention that the company has as a partnership with social programs based on hardware donations. This partnership is with *Make-A-Wish Netherlands*. According to the folder: “By participating in our IT donation program, you choose to donate all or part of the residual value. Holland Recycling adopts a wish on behalf of all donors for every €5,000 raised through this program. Any amount we can donate on your behalf will be increased by an additional 10%!”

The company works with the perception that green waste is valuable raw material and proposes the reuse of green waste through composting, thus converging with the ambitions of the circular economy. Mark told us he collects two types of “green waste” – twigs, which municipalities sell, and yard waste from household units. They also collect food products. *Soiltech*’s composting technology has resulted in a highly concentrated foliar fertilizer that Mark considers revolutionary in agriculture. Composting with efficiency adds value to the product. The result of composting is sold to agro-companies in Europe: in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany. “What about France?”, we asked. “Too far, not worth it. A truck costs 8 euros per hour”, and Mark quickly did the math on the distance to Belgium and Germany, the cost, pointing out how much more interesting it is to sell in Belgium, also because there the tax he pays is lower, “but it is still worth taking to Germany”.

What the municipalities buy comes from the “afvalbrenngstation” (waste collection stations where private waste is deposited) and tree pruning. “Garden garbage sometimes comes dirty, it has stones, you have to clean it, separate the stones. But one [type of green residue] concentrates more of a certain chemical element, the other more of the other”. Mark explains in detail all these chemical mixtures and how it results in a “fabulous compound” in his terms. In the future, Mark intends to burn some of what he recycles to create energy, as does the owner of *GroenCollect*.

When we were saying goodbye, Mark told us about a visit to Ghana at the invitation of a countryman who owned a farm and asked him to help fertilize the soil where he planted pineapples and other fruits. Mark traveled with his girlfriend. There he detected the presence of a worm that went down the river and was trapped in the dam of the place, contaminating the water and the sand, affecting the children’s health, entering through the feet, and reaching various organs. He spoke to those responsible for the dam, saying they should remove the clay from the river and use it as fertilizer, thus ridding the population of this problem. The official said that they could only do this if they had authorization from the Minister of Energy. Luckily, at the hotel where he was staying, the girlfriend managed to speak with the Vice President of the country, who was also a guest there; he contacted the Minister, and they obtained authorization and were able to do what he was proposing.

Like Mark, other business owners we spoke with had experiences in countries in the Global South. Although the inspiration to dedicate themselves to recycling often comes from these experiences, this is rarely recognized (it was in the case of the owner of *GroenCollect*). In Mark’s case, the colonial prejudice is evident: “you know how it is in Ghana, things only work with bribes, it must be like that in Brazil too”, he said, referring to the authorization to remove the worms from the river - although in his story there was no bribe involved.

Mark was super attentive and then wrote us by email asking for our LinkedIn contact – we gave him the link, and he connected us to his network. He said to be available for further questions and shared the link to a congress on recycling in Rio de Janeiro that he would attend in 2022.

### **Ethnography of garbage collection in Dutch cities**

On the way to the University of Leiden, we came across a scene that surprised us. We had just passed through a quiet street and a corner with stone benches for a walker to rest when we saw a concentration of garbage sprawled on the ground, close to some collectors’ containers. Alarmed by the presence of misplaced garbage in the middle of Leiden, we started taking pictures. Soon, several small electric garbage collection trucks approached, and men in uniform armed with cleaning equipment began to collect everything on the ground. It looked like a scene from a fictional movie. Each van and its team had a function: collecting, blowing away dirt, or washing. The chauffeur who got out of the wash truck appeared to be the head of the team, giving orders as to which way the garbage should be blown. Two more big *Renewi* trucks arrived to collect the material. We photographed and filmed without being interrupted by workers concentrating on their tasks.

After this dramatic event where the garbage was contained by the forces of urban cleaning with their sophisticated equipment, we continued on our way. Still in Leiden, we photographed various garbage collection devices always classified by the system of material origin for recycling: paper, glass, textiles, and perishable products.

### The “afvalbrengstations”

As in other European countries strongly inserted in a culture of consumption (or culture of waste, as Dumont, 1973: chap.1 refers), it is possible to observe open containers to receive materials such as furniture and household objects that private owners discard. During our academic training in France, we experienced the habit of looking for furniture and utensils in these deposits<sup>14</sup>. We used to observe several of these containers in Amsterdam, especially in neighborhoods with a predominance of immigrants of different generations. But nowadays, the disposal system in the Netherlands is well structured by the municipalities in discarded sites, where their nature classifies the waste: the so-called “afvalbrengstation”, the waste disposal posts.

As we can see, visiting several of them, people leave their green garbage and various types of waste: furniture, objects, remains of works, metals, and in one of them, even dead animals. In Zaandam, for example, we visited a large afvalbrengstation. At the reception, a poster from *hvcgroep* announced, “Your bulky waste is reused for a clean world”. The company collects and recycles waste to produce sustainable energy.

In fact, the location of this “afvalbrengstation” was obtained by following a truck that collected paper and cardboard from containers on the street, which led us to an immense collection enterprise in the port region. The process was well-organized by color-coded containers. A large poster indicated the relationship between colors and disposable products. The line of private cars carrying the disposal slowly arrived at a parking lot. The car could also be parked next to the destined container if the product was too heavy. An employee guided drivers to the appropriate parking lot. First, we went to the office requesting authorization for filming, which was granted.

At the demand of the employee consulted, we avoided capturing people’s faces as much as possible. In one of the observed scenes, a lady accompanied by her elderly parents was carrying a sofa to be dumped in a large container. The lady authorized the filming after we clarified that it was university research, giving her a visit card. We heard her say to her mother, laughing, that she should “say goodbye” to the old sofas. With the help of a local employee, the daughter and the employee could dump the old sofas in the warehouse. We filmed and photographed the various gestures of depositing materials in the collectors and the signs that indicated each type of disposal. An employee saw us and said more containers were on the floor below. In fact, the employee was happy to guide us in filming – “television”, we understood he saying to another employee.

The classifications in each bay were quite detailed, which surprised us, from breadcrumbs and appliances to plastic, beverage cans and cartons, bulky waste, and food scraps. Each type of disposal deserved a special place, and one of them was a room that looked more like an antique shop, gathering small tables, lamps, knick-knacks, and various decorative objects. The employee, delighted to direct us in the filming, led us towards the numbered stalls until the last one – there were about 30. “Keep your nose closed” he warned as we approached the small house with the door locked, where, he said, were the remains of animals – many dogs that die from the cold, if we understood correctly, but also cats, horses, and other animals. We did not smell anything.

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<sup>14</sup> The system has changed and today it is necessary to register the object to be discarded, paste a code provided by the website on the object so that it can be collected by city hall trucks.



The employees of this recycling site told us that it was a private company, of which only a small part was public. From there, the garbage would go to Alkaamar, a part would be scanned to separate (plastic, metal, and two more elements), and another would be burned in ovens to generate energy.

Other “afvalbrenngstation” visited had fewer stalls. But in all of them, the organization was similar. The one in Zaandam had the particularity of having employees with mental disabilities, Geke, the librarian, had told us two years earlier. They were kind, but had some speech difficulties.

The company responsible for these collection stations reverses the waste in solar, wind, and green projects, considered sustainable to face gas shortages, one of the major social problems in Europe, as we read in the poster of *hvc*.

“We get heat, electricity, and green gas from biomass, sun, wind, and organic waste. In this way, we work together on a sustainable Netherlands”.

## **Waste never again: *Renewi***

*Renewi* deserves a separate mention for its central activity in the circular economy in the Netherlands. Its constant presence in Zaandam, as in the whole of the Netherlands, made us understand that we would have to ethnography the *Renewi* trucks.

On one of the hikes, we focused on photographing and filming the garbage truck’s activity. On the truck, it was printed in bold letters “Waste no more”. We researched the company on the Internet and signed up for a visit, but got no response.

*Renewi* has its recycling center in Amsterdam. Its website announces that the company’s objective is to offer a new life to used materials and offers its services to companies and individuals, with the motto: Safety, Sustainability, and Renewal. It focuses on “a thriving economy” to be achieved by recycling waste and its possible reuse. It claims to have international experience in a wide range of products, recycling an average of 14 million tons of waste collected from 2 million homes, with 89% of recycled and reused products avoiding the annual emission of 3 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub><sup>15</sup>.

The company’s website mentions eight thousand workers, covering 200 activity sites. A tab on the site presents the profile of these workers, from senior executives - men and women - to garbage pickers. From a photograph of the workers, it is possible to access a short biography with their main activity in the company, place of work, personal tastes, achievements, and projects. Another tab on the site is the job offer. But it is not just a call. Each activity is presented as an added value of its functions, with short videos containing workers’ reports. The site advertises, for example, the garbage truck driver work:

As a driver, you may have the most important role at *Renewi*. You are the customers’ business card and are responsible for the collection of various waste streams such as paper, aluminum foil, construction waste, confidential documents or industrial waste. You take it to one of our sites, where we process it into secondary raw materials from which new products can be made. In this way, you contribute to a cleaner and more sustainable world. With us, you can count on: salary always punctual, overtime is paid, permanent contract visa. You drive day shifts and come home on time. Independence, variety and contact with customers. Career opportunities and great colleagues<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://careers.renewi.com/nl-nl/onze-mensen>. Consulted December 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Seen at <https://careers.renewi.com/nl-nl/werkgebieden/chauffeur-belader>. Consulted 11 December 2022.

*Renewi* claims to develop a smart, sustainable, and circular economy in which there is no waste. Focused on recycling raw materials, it guarantees to develop a policy to value the environment and nature in the fight against CO<sub>2</sub> emissions to a minimum and the depletion of the Earth.

## **Groningen and the Collective**

In a former Roman Catholic hospital (ORKZ) occupied by a residents' association of around 350 residents, we visited a colleague, Barbara Arisi. The plan was to interview the recycling activities coordinator and learn about the collective's composting activities.

ORKZ is an occupation that the State legalized in 1985, and since then, it has been operating by self-management with a board and commissions for maintenance and technical service. The association is responsible for the preservation of the property. It offers common areas of playful sociability such as a cinema, pub, concert, and exhibition hall; commercial areas (thrift stores), and comfortable individual apartments (sometimes sharing a kitchen and bathroom) for residents.

Hans, one of the oldest residents of the building, is Dutch, divorced, with 5 children, who lives alone in the building. He is respected for coordinating the recycling commission and is one of the occupation leaders. We started the interview with Prof. Barbara Arisi as a translator. Hans soon took us to the immense basement where various materials' recycling processes and waste are separated according to their nature: aluminum, iron, batteries, and microchips. In a large space, several containers are occupied by recyclable materials. There were also dozens of shopping carts full of waste.

We started the tour guided by Hans through the aluminum, copper, and other metal containers. He showed us how the material is first deposited in small plastic collectors with wheels to be easily handled and transferred underground through a ramp. There, a team transfers the collected material to the larger containers. They also have a medium crane for lifting heavy material. They are all very organized, involving significant volumes of material and the work of a team. The absence of cardboard containers caught our attention, and Hans explained that this material does not have a market value that compensates for the work involved in recycling it.

Contrary to what we had heard in 2019 about the devaluation of cans (Eckert, Rial, 2020), there were dozens of containers and supermarket carts with cans. We photographed and filmed computer remains in another room, both the plastic and electronic parts, and lots of wires. In the corner, a bucket was almost full of pet bottle caps.

The basement is where the gas and water distribution pipes are located, and interestingly among them are small artistic interventions, photo exhibitions – one with the hospital's history, which includes objects – and posters. We asked Hans what is done with the profit from the sale of waste, and he clarified that everything is invested in the technical repairs of the house under the care of the corresponding committee.

The visit to ORKZ continued with Barbara showing us how the residents separate organic waste and transport it to the garden for the large composting existing there.

## **Zaandam: a case study**

It was in 2019 that we developed an ethnographic exercise on the policy of solid waste collection in Zaandam (Eckert, Rial 2020). Located in Amsterdam-Noord, Zaandam has a history of industrial production and centralization of working families, presenting revitalization policies. It is the main city in the municipality of Zaanstad. City rights date back to 1811. Bathed by the river Zaan, it had a population of 76,804 h in 2017 (City Hall website). Geke van de Kamp, who is in charge of the municipal library archive, explained that Zaandam was originally a separate municipality. In fact, there were 7 small towns – Assendelft, Zaandam, Koogaan de Zaan,

Krommenie, Westzaan, Zaandijk, Wormerveer – which were officially united in 1974 in a single municipality, with the name of Zaanstad: “But people do not feel that they are inhabitants of Zaanstad, they still identify themselves as residents of these villages. You can see on the facade of this building, there are 7 shields that correspond to the shields of these villages”.

In this town, we conducted a dense investigation with a filming and photographing procedure using the street ethnography technique (Eckert and Rocha, 2016), in addition to interviews over 12 days, which included interviews in Amsterdam. The focus of the ethnography was centered on the Dutch urban context: environmental policy and practices of the local population related to the disposal and treatment of solid waste. In short, it was an ethnography about garbage. At least since 2017, the European Commission has placed the issue of waste disposal on the front page of newspapers, and since then, the commitment to reuse has been intense.

We stayed in a hotel close to the town hall and next to the main canal that runs between the sidewalks in the city center. The predominant landscape is clearly one of revitalization, with the main buildings (town hall, hotels, restaurants) clad in wood painted in strong colors imitating traditional Dutch houses. The predominant color is green and, we learn, has been a marker of economic status in the past - the darker the green, the richer were its owners.

The town center was very dynamic, with several shops. The little town had clearly known a policy to revitalize its landscape, with logistics for accessibility, favoring an idyllic setting with old windmills.

Garbage collectors stand out on street corners and along the canal. There are generally large containers serving shops, supermarkets, and other businesses on the corners. Several plastic collectors also draw attention along the canal and sidewalks, reminding us of the priority of cleaning in urban areas. Trash bins are arranged in large numbers, especially close to small pedestrian crossing bridges. We witnessed people drinking from paper cups next to the collectors on two occasions. When they finish their content, they immediately throw the residue in the corresponding trash.

In some dumpsters, there are devices for extinguishing cigarettes and for receiving butts. This does not mean that we often see cigarette butts thrown on the ground being collected by city officials. In fact, as one of our interlocutors among the garbage collectors would tell us, disposing of cigarettes outside the garbage cans is their main public cleaning problem and the one that takes up most of their work time.

On the first day of street ethnography, we walked down Gedempte Gracht (Silenced Canal), on the principal street. For a while, we watched passers-by at security lanes and bicycles drivers. We approached an employee who was cleaning the canal and collecting cigarette butts. We asked if we could photograph his activities. He consented to ask not to focus on his face and, answering our demand, told us his name: Spencer. Then we started a conversation about their garbage collection activities. He kept picking up the garbage, replacing the bin with a new plastic bag, or putting out little red bags called *Belloo* to collect animal excrement. Then he took a device on his electric cart to collect butts and, after, a larger collector to fish for waste in the canal, where there was little garbage. He asked us where we were from, and we replied Brazil. To our surprise, Spencer knew Brazil and rehearsed a few words in Portuguese about his trajectory. He had already lived in Belém, where he had met and married a Brazilian woman with whom he has a son. After separating, he returned to the Netherlands with his son because “here he would have greater study opportunities”. Spencer’s father is Chinese, emigrated, worked in commerce in the Netherlands, and now lives in China again. His mother, half Dutch, half Surinamese, lives in Amsterdam. In addition to some Portuguese, he speaks some English and understands Chinese words. A polyglot garbage collector! Our first surprise. And not the only one.

Spencer, the Zaandam waste picker's supervisor, traded a hotel job for work at the municipality. He has little education, but his salary can be better than that of a hotel attendant<sup>17</sup>. It is eight hours a day, an activity that he starts by taking the electric truck from the garage to clean up the rubbish, the canal water, and the sidewalk weeds. Spencer told us that cigarette butts are the hardest garbage to collect. He has instruments of various kinds, so he does not have to bend down. He takes care of the public space – but there are private spaces, like the water around the best-known hotel in the city – whose cleaning is the owners' responsibility and must be done 3 times a year. He also told us that he collects pets – which his son can exchange in supermarkets for coins. We did not see autonomous collectors with plastic bags in their hands picking up cans and pets in the Netherlands, as is so common in large Brazilian cities. But we saw a chambermaid leave the hotel at the end of her shift with a plastic bag full of pet bottles in her hand. Returned pets are refunded by 10 cents, explained Judith, our interlocutor from Abbenes.

Spencer greets people and seems to know and have a good relationship with the locals (so different from the waste pickers in Brazil, we thought). We talked about his life and tasks, but to avoid interfering with his workday, we arranged another meeting, as he told us he was there every day.

We continued photographing and filming garbage cans along the canal and on the sidewalks, observing the pattern and relationship of the inhabitants with them. Then, we decided to visit the most prominent tourist spot in Holland, Zaanse Schans, a village with typical low wooden houses and a concentration of windmills surrounding a lake. At the Zaanse Schans Museum cafe, we interviewed an employee about how they dealt with waste there. The employee said that they kept a trash bin near the cashier, and from there, the garbage was taken to the back of the building, where a worker placed it in a large container. This container is emptied once or twice a week, which we found to be not very often for a cafe with so many customers. When talking about the waste collection at her home, she surprised us by saying that the practice of selecting-separating organic waste and other solid waste is recent. Mandatory recycling in the domestic space started in Amsterdam in 2019.

She clarified that the buildings have different garbage containers marked with the apartment number. If the city inspector finds mixtures of cans, plastic paper, glass, or organic waste, the apartment has to pay a fine of more or less 100 euros, about 500 reais. Therefore, “everyone recycles”, concluded our interlocutor.

On the way back from the Zaans Museum, we walked towards the town hall when we found Spencer again with his electric garbage collection cart in full swing. We greeted him, and he stopped the car for us to talk. Spencer took off his gloves to greet us, and we spoke initially in Portuguese but soon switched to English. He told us about the cleaning process on the canal in front of the main hotel. He explained that private firms contracted by the administration conducted this procedure. This task must be conducted three times a year by the private company specializing in this type of cleaning.

On Zaandam's garbage problems, Spencer opined that “the biggest problem is the people. They do not comply with the rules and throw garbage in inappropriate places. There is no education”, he said, emphasizing that currently, young people do not care much about parental guidelines. We asked about environmental education and if his son had received information of this nature. He replied that there was, yes, some environmental training in schools, but this depended above all on parental education. He emphasized that the most important thing was to reinforce the current policy for selected waste. Spencer repeated the explanation we heard at the Museum that each building has containers with different colors, according to the items to be collected and an identification number. Each resident has an electronic card to open the trash and thus be able to deposit the waste. He showed us his card. We continued talking about his family background and his son's education at a school in the city.

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<sup>17</sup> We saw on the Renewi website that there were vacancies and that they earned between 2 and 3 thousand euros a month.

Before saying goodbye, we took the opportunity to ask Spencer where the festival planned for next weekend would be, which he had mentioned. He showed a billboard advertising the event and explained that “it’s right in the center”. We said goodbye, and he continued to guide other colleagues in the garbage collection.

A librarian for 15 years, Geke is assigned to the historical collection of Zaandam. She provided historical information and images on health and environmental issues and taught us how to navigate the municipality’s website to access digitally collected videos and photographs (Eckert; Rial 2020).

We asked about the current home collection of garbage and recycling policy. Geke explained what Spencer had already said: each building will have its containers with different colors for the selection and separation of waste by its nature: organic, glass, paper, plastic, etc. The underground container is opened with this personal card every two days. So, we ask: “And if you do something wrong, how can they know?” She replied, “I think they know”, laughed, and added a “little jet” that she discovered a little while ago: “Someone told me that the container has a side opening, so if a mother needs to change a baby’s diaper and she is on the street, she can put the dirty diaper through this opening. There is a way to bypass the system.” And she showed us the same type of card to access the containers, which she had tied with a plastic string, along with her keys at her waist, suggesting frequent use. She also explained that one of the recurring criticisms made by individuals is that this separation must be done individually, not by the company.

We enter the theme of the evident revitalization of the city of Zaandam. She said that it is an area that has been “gentrified” in recent times, following the rise in prices in Amsterdam, but that it is, above all, for the identity of a working-class city that the place is known: “In the past, this area was famous for the industrial wood (for boat construction) and the food industry: chocolate, rice, paper; and the mills that initially made flour and processed cocoa.

Thanks to the important industrial complex for food, storage, or production, this area was called “the breadbasket of the Dutch golden age”. The location close to Amsterdam facilitated the receipt of raw materials and the distribution of products, making it the main food-producing hub for the Dutch population. In the 1970s, Turkish, Italian, and some Spanish immigrants came to this area to work in the factories. The Spaniards especially came to work in a steel company (*Hillhover*). It became known for welcoming immigrants, especially Turkish immigrants – and even today, there are many Turkish restaurants that we find here. But with competition from Chinese industry, many factories were closed. It is also an area that has concentrated many Mennonites and Amish. And these are people who care a lot about the environment.

Geke brought photos from the city hall library collection of how garbage was collected in the past when there were no toilets in homes in Zaandam.

“In this photo from 1927, we see that boats passed by each house to collect the dirty water. The system lasted until the 1950s. Imagine the smell! [The collectors] were called “tumant schoenen” (tumant shoes)”.

The “tumant schoenen” photos show buckets full of excrement hung from a pole carried on the back and placed on boats parked on the houses’ pier verandas. And photos of two men carrying buckets attached to sticks. We also saw wagons and vans fulfilling the same function of collecting excrement, household dirt, water, and waste, in 1950. Zaandam was one of the last locations in the country to install a sewage system – by another lucky coincidence so common in research, without knowing it, we chose this location for the fieldwork.

Zaandam was also a pioneer in practices that today deserve the name of sustainable (“ecological” for Lutzemberger, 1983, 1995), told us Geke:

“A factory here recycled jeans since 1650, used to make paper with old fabrics. It was only from 1870 onwards that they began to make paper from wood. Of course, at the time, there was no talk of recycling, it was the only way to make paper.”

We took advantage of the conversation with Geke to clarify our doubts. We had dedicated ourselves to getting to know the garbage collection equipment in the city. Every day, we walked through the streets and neighborhoods seeking to recognize the waste collection process and the available infrastructure, conducting interviews whenever possible and photographing the different types of garbage, bags on the ground, and waste on the sidewalk - disposals according to the norm and outside of it.

We tried to decipher the color convention: the black plastic bins are for collecting organic products, the blue bins are for paper, and the green ones are for glass. We find container devices for more specific collections in some corners, such as metals, fabrics, glass, papers, etc. Containers for the collection of electronic products and specified by nature are found in electronics stores and supermarkets.

We present a photo with a poster regulating the use of colored containers. She found it curious that researchers photographed garbage cans, but she patiently confirmed the color code. Geke explained that the numbers on the plastic containers correspond to the house number, “and if someone is walking down the street, they can’t throw their rubbish there”.

Geke commented on the photos we took, saying that, currently, each house needs to have four different types of waste: organic, paper, plastic, and glass containers. She explained that individual containers must be placed on the street at 8 am and removed before 8 pm under penalty of a fine. Solid waste, such as plastic and cardboard, is collected once a month. They are commercial companies that collect the minicontainers in front of each house.

Laughing, she told us a story that illustrates well possible confusion. One day when she went to pick up her garbage bins, they were not where she had left them. She hit the neighbor to ask if she had not changed the trash cans:

“Do you have mine?” “No!” - she answered. I finally found out that it had been an older lady who had changed the rubbish. Well, I had only been living there for half a year, so it was good to integrate into the new neighborhood.”

In apartments, it is different; there are containers in the basement where the “leftovers” are taken, which cannot be recycled, such as plastic, paper, or glass. Recycling has existed for a long time, but this mandatory separation was imposed about 2 years ago. There is also a tax on plastic garbage bags that must be purchased at the municipality –the more garbage you have, the more bags you need, and the more expensive it will be.

She told us that there were four garbage bins in her apartment’s kitchen.

“Today, after breakfast, I threw the plastic in one and the breadcrumbs in another. This organic garbage is very uncomfortable in the summer, as it attracts fruit flies and other insects. And it’s smelly. I don’t like summer, that’s why.

This organic waste is collected once a week, on Fridays, in her case. Plastic and paper once a month, also on Friday, obeying the scheduled times.

“This morning I thought I had to separate the tube of toothpaste, but I was in a hurry and put everything together, not caring too much about the environment.”

She added that, close to the malls, there are large containers, and that plastic can be discarded at any time, free of charge. The padlock on some containers shows that it is a private container from a store, prohibited from public access. In summer, the green containers are collected every week, and in winter, every 2 weeks. Batteries, batteries, and light bulbs must be taken to special collection points, usually in malls and supermarkets. She said there are places where you can take materials to be exchanged for others, bought or sold. We asked about stores that sell used clothes. She informed us where there was one and that this store was becoming increasingly popular.

She searched in the archives for a photo of a large metal cone, and we saw a teenager throwing a can. “You may think this is funny, but in places where young people are very frequent, they also installed these devices”, in a kind of campaign for disposal to be a sport or a recreational activity.

We direct the conversation to ask about working conditions, minimum wage, and the education of garbage collectors. Geke replied that schooling, in general, is low. She said that people who cannot work, due to mental problems, for example, receive federal aid and must work in return – as a garbage collector, for instance. Later in the conversation, when we insisted on knowing if this was a stigmatized job, she said that today the garbage no longer smells bad, they have many instruments and products, and they earn well, so there are students who work collecting garbage. The curious thing is that they are called “nopos<sup>18</sup>”, which means “free”, but not because it is voluntary work, she adds.

About the recent past, she assesses that there were risks in certain discards. She remembered the danger in the 1980s and 1990s with the “junkies” in Amsterdam.

“We could get hurt with the needles they threw anywhere. But today you don’t see that anymore, also because drug consumption has changed, there’s not so much heroin anymore”.

She said she saw a lot of changes.

“These days, in the supermarket, I saw a man who brought his own plastic mug [supermarkets offer free coffee and tea]. It’s an idea. More and more people bring their own bags so they don’t have to pay for plastic bags at the supermarket.”

Currently, the municipality encourages sustainability policies, subsidizing companies that recycle, for example, clothing or furniture. Another photo, of a metal ashtray with sand prompts a comment:

“These are new [apparatus]. Employees are not allowed to smoke in the building, so they leave. Also here we have all these garbage cans. It amazes me how much garbage we produce every day.”

Geke also spoke about topics related to solid waste, which are currently being widely discussed in the Netherlands. We talked about the neocolonial policy of sending part of the country’s garbage to Africa and Asia and about accepting garbage from other countries to be processed (burned) and generated energy. “Today, the Netherlands cannot handle the waste produced here, which has increased a lot”.

She commented on other photos of us, one of a construction container, one for Salvation Army clothes, another, underground, for glass, without containing her laughter at the unusualness of the images: “ah, you anthropologists...” . We thanked her for the interview, and she still laughed and said that the conversation provided “a funny way of looking at my own country through our photos”.

The next day in Zaandam, we once again dedicated ourselves to filming the recycling equipment in supermarkets, where we found: recycling light bulbs, pets and glass bottles, bottle caps, and other waste collectors. On the street, we found an employee collecting cigarette butts, and at our request to take pictures, he showed us how he did it. Consulting the internet about this collection practice, we read that

“the decomposition time of an incorrectly discarded cigarette butt can reach up to five years, especially if it is thrown on the asphalt, not to mention the fact that it contains more than 4,700 toxic substances, which harm the soil, contaminating rivers and streams. This relative delay in decomposition is due to the fact that 95% of cigarette filters are composed of cellulose acetate, which is difficult to degrade”<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> We cannot find that word, the closest translation for ‘free’ and close phonetically to “nopos” is ‘los’ or ‘vlot.’

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.ecycle.com.br/1894-bituca.html>. Consulted in November 2019.

September 8th. Festival day Zaanse UITmarkt<sup>20</sup>. A large space is taken up by stalls, each with a function, in addition to the park and food spaces. Two stalls right at the entrance. One dedicated to publicizing the Zaan Museum and distributing folders and information. We talked to the receptionists in this one, who gave us some folders. Another was set up by the city hall, exhibiting municipal publications and many boxes of old photographs reproduced for sale. At the town hall tent, we found Geke, who introduced us to a young man and explained to him, in Dutch, who we were.

Another tent caught our attention for its ecological proposal: a young man invited passers-by to ride a bicycle that would generate energy to run a blender. We accept the challenge. Eric, that is his name, put a banana and some juice in a blender adapted to the bicycle. Pedaling gave energy for the blender to work. We took the opportunity to ask Eric about garbage practices. The young man explained that he selected but emphasized that there was excess consumption and, therefore, a large amount of garbage. Excess consumption was the main problem. After offering us the juice we had produced in a paper cup, he disposed of the container separately from organic waste.

On the way back to the hotel, we found the fruit fair in the city already closing. The empty boxes and the garbage were being collected by the stallholders. And we found Spencer. We talked about the event and the accumulation of dirt on Saturday because it was a busy day. In fact, the shops were full. At the bandstand, a jazz band animated the passers-by. The orchestra competed with a gentleman who played the organ device, aiming to collect coins. We asked him if he ever had Saturday off. He replied that neither on Saturday nor Sunday, as they are days of a lot of garbage. The channel was clear, but here and there, papers, bottles, and even a floating balloon appeared - and Spencer hurried to collect the material.

At the end of the afternoon, a ZNSTD truck washed the sidewalk. To pass with the small truck, the driver went down to lower the protective pillars preventing vehicles from entering the canal avenue to make a U-turn and, once again, travel along the main avenue with the washers turned on. The city was once again taken by peace.

Cleanliness is present in the town's routine and on the Zaan River. We could observe this on a 10 km route with the catamaran. The ferry departed at 2 pm towards the Zaanse Schans park, the mill area. We were impressed with the cleanliness of the water and the large number of bridges that the boat crossed, some of which had to be raised up. Large industrial buildings, some ancient, some modern, of grand proportions mostly dominate the landscape. The highlight among the building companies is the chocolate one, which occupies a huge territory. Its passage announces the park's proximity and the mills' view. Small villages with typical houses intersected the industrial zone. Accustomed to the industry-polluted water relationship, witnessing this proximity between the industrial area and the crystalline waters was the biggest impact.

The last few days in Zaandam were devoted to long walks, generally starting from the central avenue of the Gedempte Gracht towards more residential neighborhoods. We opened the collectors to check their contents. We found organic waste in the black garbage, in the other cans, in general, cardboard and plastic. However, some containers had mixed materials, such as paper with soil and leaves. Perhaps a small oversight subject to fines. In the buildings, we found containers accessible only through cards and codes.

## **In homes, composting and recycling**

We had two interviews scheduled in Amsterdam at Nico Vink's residence in Oosterpark the day before the Festival. Nico is 75 years old; we talked a little in Portuguese because he attended graduation in Brazil. He defended his doctoral thesis in the Netherlands on Brazilian telenovelas. We recorded with Nico and his partner Vital.

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<sup>20</sup> [www.zaanseuitmarkt.nl](http://www.zaanseuitmarkt.nl) Consulted in November 2019.



They reported that, like them, in general, all city dwellers perform the separation of organic waste and recycled waste. In this case, the material to be reused consists of packaging, paper, lids, glass, and plastic. Vital took us to the kitchen and indicated the garbage he kept in separate cupboards and drawers: lids, cans, etc., recyclables already separated. He opened a drawer with dismantled milk carton packaging that could be recycled. The space needed to store recyclable garbage was large. It took up almost half of the kitchen space. And that was not all; the glass was accumulated in the basement.

Also in Judith's house, there was ample space to store garbage. Living in a rural context, she had a laundry room where she kept various plastic bins used to separate organic products and recyclable waste. Judith has a homemade garden compost: a plastic bucket with a big hole. She uses the compost from there in the garden with horticultural crops and flowers. In Amsterdam, Vital also dedicated himself to composting in the backyard of the ground floor apartment, taking advantage of the organic waste deposited in a plastic container with holes in the bottom, similar to Judith's, but much larger. We head to the place where he composts, wearing typical Dutch clogs.

We found the most developed composting system in Gronigen, showed by Prof. Arisi. At the back of the ORKZ, an occupied building, there was a vast space for planting horticultural crops. In one of the corners, large rows separated by wooden divisions mark the different moments of composting: the organic residues pass from one to another after a certain time. Posters guide users about the organic that can be placed there and what cannot (citrus fruits, meat, cooked food, for example).

We also spoke with Vital about collecting other waste. He explained that he moves this material weekly to be discarded in specific city hall containers. And he invited us to go to the corner to see the containers. We follow Vital. At the corner of the other street, they found four large containers, each with a lid in a different color: white, blue, yellow, and orange. Vital explained that they were containers with an apparent "mouth" and a larger container underground. In the white one, the collection is textile. In the blue lid are collected cardboard packages. Plastics are collected in the garbage with an orange lid and glass in the yellow one. Vital explained that the collection truck passed by every day. "What about organic?" we asked. Vital replied that they were deposited in the container a little further on, pointing to their location. In this way, residents of the region who did not practice composting needed to bring their waste to this location. The daily collection in the capital contrasts with Judith's statement, who complains about the long wait for garbage to be collected, especially the common leftovers – the others are picked up more frequently. She explained to us that there is a different schedule for the collection of each type of garbage. She also complained that there is no paper and cardboard collection, which you must take to the supermarket, as well as electronics. The cans? Put it together with the electronics. But pets can be exchanged at supermarkets for a 10-cent refund.

The second interview in Amsterdam, with Prof. Theije, reinforced the information given by Vital, Geke, and the coffee attendant at the Zaans Museum. She said that she separates the waste by selection according to the genre of the material and follows the rules established by the disposal policy with the use of the card for individual use in the condominium. She recalled that the fine was significant, and that the tendency was to comply with the rules.

## Final remarks

The Netherlands has serious territorial constraints. It is a country established, for the most part, on embankments that extend into the sea, but space is very limited. Where to put all the garbage this society produces if it cannot be exported? How to deal with this "inconvenient things" to keep the "habitability" of Neatherlands with "response ability"? Recycling, and in it the important presence of the privatization of the recycling economy, is one of the possible answers. When discussing privatization, the focus is often on

achieving profitability. However, sustainable development is a valuable ethical principle that can also lead to financial gains. Garbage to be recycled implies profit and savings in collection expenses.

While circular economy practices are associated with profit for companies, individual users of the waste management system acknowledge and support the circular economy but also note that it has led to increased surveillance of their daily lives and a form of biopolitics. The advance of biopolicies can be observed when the State established a project of controlled recycling, followed by civil society to avoid contravention, either by joining a green economy or ecological projects. The consequence of this change in waste treatment - although it already existed before, it has been enormously reinforced in the last 2 years - is the new visibility that disposal gains in the daily lives of individuals. Even in small apartments, as in most domestic spaces in Amsterdam, a city with a high cost of square meters, containers for collecting solid waste start to occupy a large part of the room. And the option for one or the other implies a choice, a rational operation: "Should I put this here or there?" We can no longer have the automatism of other times, in which the foot activated the lid of the garbage can, and it went there. Anything that no longer served, in an almost unconscious gesture.

Even those passing through the country, as was the case with us, feel the change in policy around the garbage that might involve hotels. In the bathroom of our hotel room, there was an announcement saying that, in case of accumulation, the garbage in the room should be taken (by the guest) to a slightly larger bin located in the hallway on the floor. Garbage has lost its invisibility in this space as well and what used to be at the service of maids now has to be done by all of us, at least in economic hotels, as is the case with Easy. Another example of new rules we found is the purchase of household appliances. In addition to the instruction manual that traditionally accompanies these products, a separate sheet has now been added, saying that that object cannot be disposed of as common rubbish and must be taken to special places for disposal. This information, which previously appeared in the Instructions for Use Manual, now deserves a much larger space, more visible.

To the visibility of the garbage, penalties and surveillance are added. The Dutch people we talked to, in general, feel watched by the State with its controls over the types of garbage, the cards that individualize access to containers and that can provide the government, at any time, with data on their private consumption - which they do not seem to worry about, as there is no emphasis on this point - and data on the accuracy of disposal, whether or not they did the sorting well, and this has financial implications with high fines. Outside the days and times scheduled for collection, it is up to the individual to seek another place for disposal - which is not always a simple task and can have consequences if not done regularly, again with monetary fines.

The ethnographic and archive research in Zaandam, added to the interviews carried out with CEOs of recycling companies, revealed that these practices of waste separation, waste collection, reuse of organic waste, and recycling of inorganic waste are differentiated in generational experiences related to the histories of their territorialities, such as that of Zaandam. We were surprised to find such a recent control policy working from a punitive perspective for the consistency of an ecological policy.

But ethnography always makes it possible to recognize the flows of everyday life and, in the case of their experience in Zaandam, as the issue of garbage is experienced as an ecological policy, not without conflicts and contradictions, it always raises the question: what to do with so much garbage on a planet that is increasingly depleted?

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# Feeding the earth: composting and compost in an indigenous garden in Rio de Janeiro

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## Abstract

This article examines compost as a theoretical concept taken from the practice of composting, which can be used to think about social processes. Compost is presented according to the practice of *feeding the earth*, by Niara do Sol and her colleagues at the *Dja Guata Porã* garden, located at the *Aldeia Vertical* [Vertical Village] in Rio de Janeiro. After introducing the garden and describing the composting processes carried out there, we argue that the theoretical figure of compost indicates a practice of mixing between heterogeneous elements that enables us to understand the plural sociability that exists in this garden space. This concept is also very fruitful for reflecting on relationships that differ from an ideal of purity.

**Keywords:** Compost, composting, Indigenous people in cities, landscape, urban gardens, multi-species.

# Alimentar a terra: a compostagem e o composto em uma horta indígena no Rio de Janeiro

## Resumo

O presente artigo trata o composto como um conceito teórico retirado da prática da compostagem, conceito este que também pode ser utilizado para pensar processos sociais. O composto é apresentado segundo a prática de *alimentar a terra* realizada por Niara do Sol e seus colegas na Horta Dja Guata Porã, situada na Aldeia Vertical, no Rio de Janeiro. A partir da apresentação da horta e da descrição dos processos de compostagem ali realizados, argumentamos que a figura do composto aponta para uma prática da mistura entre elementos heterogêneos que permite pensar a socialidade plural existente nesse espaço, sendo também um conceito teórico muito produtivo para entender relações que diferem de um ideal de pureza.

**Palavras-chave:** Composto, compostagem, indígenas na cidade, paisagem, hortas urbanas, multiespécies.

# Feeding the earth: composting and compost in an indigenous garden in Rio de Janeiro

Camila Bevilaqua Afonso and Arthur Pereira Imbassahy

## Introduction

In this article, we argue that more than merely being a place for community planting, *the garden is a way of thinking about relationships*. Plants, food, medicine, bodies, relationships, autonomy, money and, above all, vitality for the land and the human and non-human participants involved are produced from this engagement. Through composting, situationally and non-deterministically, food remains that could be ignored as waste enters a process of care and transformation, with the potential to restore fertility to the land and generate a more fruitful future.

In the first section, we present a garden called *Dja Guata Porã*, located in the centre of Rio de Janeiro and largely composed of indigenous people of different ethnicities. In this garden, we observed a focus on the transmission of knowledge through practice, in which care and intimacy with the compost, the land, the plants, the people and other beings involved is a fundamental factor in its success. Rather than seeking abstract knowledge through cataloguing species, for example, the garden participants prefer to stick to specific situations, paying attention to the needs of each being and emphasising the interconnections between the health of the land, the garden and the human and non-human beings present there.

Next, we focus more specifically on the practice of composting, since it is a process that provides us with the basis for the elaboration of a theory of compost. In composting, a correlation exists between giving nourishment to the earth and producing future food. More than a cycle, it is a transformation process that requires constant care, attention and intimacy with each specific compost. Composting highlights a fertility that is not produced through the harmonic synthesis of pure elements, but rather through the decomposition and reuse of heterogeneous elements, by diverse beings in squalid contexts. In composting, favourable conditions depend on the transformation of organic matter by a multitude of beings, from bacteria and fungi to earthworms, insects and humans, without achieving a complete convergence, but rather collaboration between them.

In the last part of the article, we perform a bibliographic review of the theoretical discussions around the concept of compost, which emerges from the practice of composting. We propose that this theoretical formulation assists us in understanding not only the functioning of the garden and composting, but also the plural modes of sociality that exist therein. Here, the theoretical discussion approaches that of 'compost politics' (Abrahamsson & Bertoni, 2014), in which the authors propose the existence of a mutualist aggregation between different beings and activities in composting, producing specific results for each of those involved without necessarily meaning identification between the parties involved. We also rely on proposals for attention to the multi-specific landscape, focused on the relationships between humans, other species, microorganisms, and the environment. In this approach, the landscape is generated by the collaboration between humans and non-humans, in a continuous process that requires the collective activity of different beings with different purposes (Tsing, 2005), something that we observed to be fundamental, in general, for both the functioning of the composter and the garden.

In all cases, there is an underlying opposition to the metaphysics of purity, which assumes stable definitions and a certain state of cleanliness, moral or bodily, as if it were possible to maintain separation between different beings, while avoiding any kind of contamination. On the one hand, there is a modern presumption of purifying the world, as Bruno Latour (1993) discusses, but also, more specifically, an ideal that aims to detach individuals from an entanglement of relationships. Thus, concerning the metaphysics of purity, Shotwell (2016) highlights the assumption that problems in the production and consumption of food can be solved through individual choices, regardless of the collective, or that it is possible to determine which species are native or not, thus eliminating foreign species, as discussed by Mastanak *et al.* (2014) on the concept of native and the pursuit of social and botanical purity.

In the case of the *Dja Guata Porã* garden, we observe a diversity of plants and processes that are not intended to be exclusively native or traditional, even though they are carried out by people who identify as indigenous. This is an encounter between different plant species and indigenous persons of different ethnicities, with different origins, who embrace this collective entanglement rather than deny it. We propose the vitality of the theoretical category of compost to assist in understanding this multiple sociality mode, which aims to produce vitality in the future through relationships and practices carried out in the present.

### **A garden called *Dja Guata Porã***

The garden known as *Dja Guata Porã* is being developed on one side of a housing complex, next to a building inhabited almost entirely by indigenous people, which the residents call *Aldeia Vertical* [Vertical Village]. Constructed in 2014 by the housing plan *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* (MCMV) [My House, My Life], the complex has 53 apartment blocks and is located on Frei Caneca Street, in the centre of Rio de Janeiro, on land where the Frei Caneca Penitentiary Complex once stood, which was the first prison in Brazil and was demolished in 2010. The garden occupies the space between the back of the buildings, extending for about 25 m (80 ft) in length by 5 m (16 ft) in width, between the housing complex and a large stone wall built in the colonial era, which is 10 m (33 ft) in height, and has been maintained as historical heritage following the demolition of the prison. In a small space, restricted by rules determined by MCMV and its manager, the Caixa Econômica bank, the garden is unrestricted in terms of its potential for constructing new types of relationships.

The project team is led by Dauá Puri, Elvira Alves Sateré Mawé and Niara do Sol; the latter is the daughter of Fulni-ô and Cariri parents and is the space's creator. The team also includes apprentices – the main ones are Jonas and Escovino –, as well as several students and visitors who participate in activities and occasionally work as volunteers. In addition to the *Dja Guata Porã* garden, also known as the *Aldeia Vertical* garden, the collective also cares for plants at the Frei Caneca Family Clinic and at the *Horta Carioca* [Carioca Garden] in Morro do São Carlos. These form a network that interconnects with other partnerships that have developed over time, through which exchanges and the propagation of seeds, seedlings, and knowledge take place.

The fieldwork on which this research is based first began at the *Horta Carioca* in Morro do São Carlos, in 2016. The following year, we followed the occurrence of the *Horta na Praça Mauá* [Mauá Square Garden] and later, in 2018, the development of the garden at *Aldeia Vertical*. The origins of the *Aldeia Vertical* garden date back to 2017, when some participants involved in the *Horta Carioca* in Morro do São Carlos, including Dauá Puri, Niara do Sol and Iracema Pankararu, were invited to participate in the *Dja Guata Porã* exposition, held at the *Museu de Arte do Rio* (MAR) [Rio Art Museum] for one year. Iracema had a stall to sell handicrafts with other indigenous people, Dauá participated in the exposition on the Puri people, and Niara was responsible for the *Estação da Natureza* [Nature Exhibit], which consisted of a garden inside crates on display in the flowerbeds of Praça Mauá. The exposition garden consisted of almost 200 crates, with a wide variety of species.

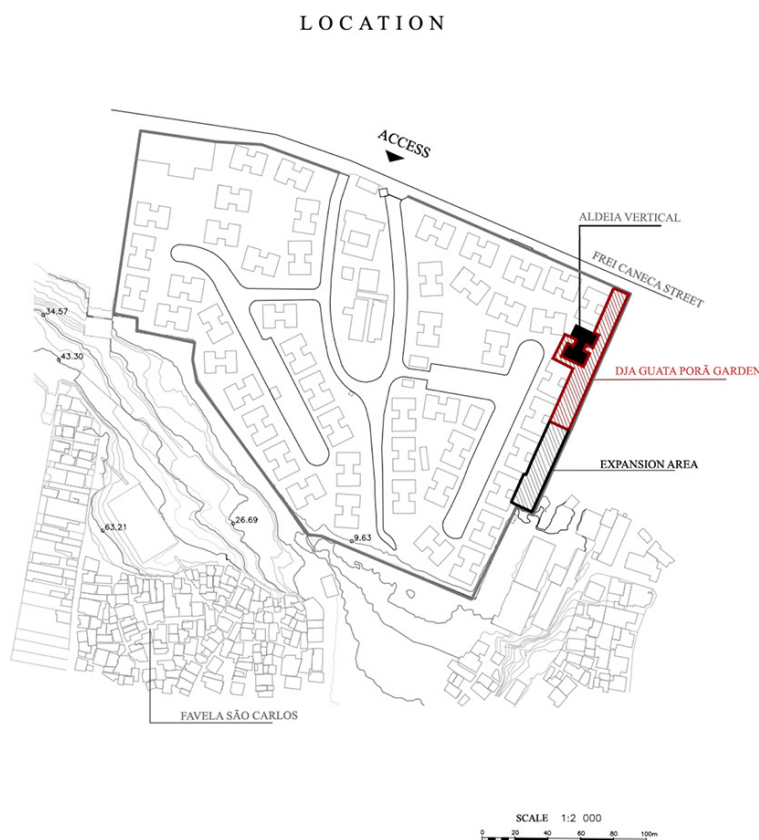


Niara is proud of the project, since in addition to having received institutional support to organise it, many people passed by the square every day and were interested in the plants. This enabled Niara to strengthen two pillars of her garden project: planting and teaching.

As the exposition came to a close, the *Estação da Natureza* had to be dismantled, leaving the question of what to do with all those crates of plants. Apparently, the most obvious choice was to take all the material to the MVMC complex. Fortunately, and perhaps due to the institutional support of the MAR, or Niara's persistence, the *Aldeia Vertical* managed to obtain permission, which had previously been denied, to plant all the seedlings at the back of the apartment blocks. In addition, MAR arranged the freight that took the crates to *Aldeia Vertical*, and thus the new garden began. Niara kept the name *Dja Guata Porã*, which in Guarani means 'walk well and walk together', as a tribute to the exposition.

The idea for this new garden was to turn it into a nursery for seedlings. Thus, the objective was not just to plant, like they had at the *Horta Carioca*, nor just to teach people how to plant or handle plants, like at the garden in the *Estação da Natureza*, but to also make seedlings available to people who intended to grow their own garden. Thus, the garden called *Dja Guata Porã* works as a mother garden that enables the expansion of other similar initiatives. This article focuses on this garden in particular, even though the project actually consists not only of a garden, but also a network and a seedling nursery that is intended to be a catalyst for transformations, providing other people with the opportunity to learn how to plant so that they can start their own gardens.

**Figure 1.** Map showing the location of the Frei Caneca Minha Casa Minha Vida complex, Aldeia Vertical and the Dja Guata Porã garden.



Source: elaborated by Priscila Martins

*Dja Guata Porã* is a kind of garden<sup>1</sup> that evokes the origins of the term, in which the existence of both edible and medicinal plants is reconciled, together with ornamental plants. Ornamental plants are used to attract collaborators, both human (visitors) and non-human (pollinators). Among these, some species are cultivated for their properties – attracting insects, butterflies and animal pollinators – and others because they produce flowers and attract people from the surroundings, ‘calling’ them to walk around and take pictures in the area. Over time, an aesthetic concern began to be developed in the garden, such that, *by way of* people’s fascination with flowers, which can serve as a lure, the garden attracts the attention of those who were not yet aware of the work carried out there. However, in a markedly different manner to the colonial botanical endeavour (Grove, 1995), whose interest in species was encyclopaedic, that is, cataloguing and compiling them, the interest of the *Aldeia Vertical* garden is practical, such that what is of interest to its creators is *the use of these plants*, rather than their classifications.

In the *Aldeia Vertical* garden, knowledge occurs through observation within a specific context in which a practice is *required* – and never randomly taught. Learning occurs more through observation than through verbal instructions, such that questions are frowned upon. This learning takes place through repetition, with the aim of perfecting the practice that must be put into motion. Thus, learning should begin with practice and lead to practice, in which knowledge is not acquired for curiosity or just theoretically.

Niara tries to conduct the pedagogical space of the garden in a manner consistent with the vision that emphasises the specificity of each being and the importance of knowledge being practical, both in its acquisition and in its subsequent application. Therefore, she emphasises that knowing the plants through their use, treatment, and origin is more important than cataloguing them or consolidating this knowledge through writing. During attempts to identify and list all the plants present in the garden, we encountered difficulties and a lack of interest from Niara and the other participants for this type of initiative. These difficulties included fear and lack of consensus concerning the name of each plant, which were not found in isolated beds, but were always mixed with others, but mainly due to the fact that the plants are in movement.

In a short period of time, new plants arrived and others were transplanted to different beds. When asked about this, Niara made us aware that plants changed places not only there, but in all the gardens. This is done not only to prevent soil depletion, but also because each plant has its own needs, which requires daily work and constant care in cleaning, replanting, harvesting, transplanting and composting to keep the garden healthy. Deep down, this knowledge removed from its practice space loses much of its potency and becomes something different from the learning proposed by Niara, since work in the garden is not based on *a collection of botanical information, but on a posture towards plants, the soil, the environment and treatments for human diseases*.

Botanical curiosity and the various practices related to biodiversity were certainly already present among the Amerindian peoples long before colonisation; however, based on *their own diverse logics*. It is important to think about the infrastructure of the garden and how it is created based on certain relationships between humans and plants, and how such relationships can favour different beings, as Myers (2017) points out. In the case of the *Aldeia Vertical* garden, its design is thought out *together with the plants*, which, according to Niara, have *the autonomy to choose where they will be placed*. Moreover, according to Niara, plants *speak* – and she listens to them. The logic at work in the garden is closer to the science of the concrete, which proceeds more through the sensible qualities of beings and objects than through the abstract logic of formal properties (Lévi-Strauss, 1962), wherein the latter would seek to classify, consolidate and design the garden *a priori*.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The Latin termed *hortus gardinus* denominated a space for growing fruit trees, vegetables, greens and flowers, close to homes. The etymon is present in the English garden and in the German *Garten*.’ DA SILVA, Deonísio. 2014. *De Onde Vêm as Palavras*. Rio de Janeiro: Lexikon.

Unlike vegetable gardens that are designed and then planted, in which each species has a bed or a previously delimited space, the *Aldeia Vertical* garden is conspicuous for the multiplicity of plants that share the same space and for its modularity. The plants are mixed together, and many of them are planted in crates, which enables spatial rearrangement whenever necessary. During a visit by architecture students to the garden, Lévi-Strauss' opposition between the bricoleur and the engineer reappears transformed. The students made proposals to spatially reorganise the garden: instead of mixing plants, they proposed designing beds for different species and concentrating the crates in certain areas to increase the circulation space in the garden.

Niara replied that they thought like architects, while she thought like an indigenous woman. The choice of where the plants are located, according to Niara, was not hers or the architects, but of the plants themselves. They should only be rearranged by paying attention to their practical needs, for example, whether or not they like certain lighting conditions or sharing the soil with other species. Moreover, Niara tells the students that it was difficult for them to understand, but when planting a seed, she would talk to the seed to find out where the future plant would like to be. Therefore, it was not up to Niara to decide arbitrarily, because if she chose a place that the plant did not want to be, the seedling would simply not grow. On this occasion, Niara reminded the students that everything they thought she had already experienced in practice, and that abstractly drawing a garden or vegetable garden that has not yet been planted is one thing, but what she does is quite another, since the plants already exist before the drawing is made<sup>2</sup>.

There are certain species in the *Aldeia Vertical* garden that are planted in rows and that fulfil specific functions, for example *ora-pro-nobis* (Barbados gooseberry), a vine with thorns that rests on a bamboo fence and divides the internal flower beds, close to the housing complex, from the external flower beds, where there is a path that traverses the garden parallel to the large stone wall. However, this separation favours modularity and multiplicity, since it prevents the smaller plants in the internal beds from being disturbed or removed by those who pass through the external path of the garden. When the architecture students proposed freeing up more space in these external flowerbeds, Niara emphasised that she prefers less free space precisely so that she can better control circulation and avoid empty land so that passers-by and the MCMV residents do not throw rubbish there.

Thus, there is a logic behind the (dis)organisation of space: a vegetal logic.

I have a slightly different planting method to other people. For example, in order to plant this plant—which you're stepping on, and destroying—that's called St. John's Wort, I need to know what it's for, what its purpose is, how it's supposed to be used. So, nothing that has been planted here is planted without rhyme or reason. Everything planted here we know about and then I explain it to people who come to take courses, who come to study. (Niara, interviewed by Martins, 2021)

This differentiated logic in planting, Niara's logic, is guided by the potential utility of plants and designed to meet the various needs of numerous species, not just human needs.

On the other hand, the space is purposefully organised to make circulation more difficult in some sections to hide certain species and protect the plants. This is done to prevent both the plants and the garden from being accessed incorrectly. The fact that it is aimed at teaching and propagating seedlings does not mean that this transmission can be achieved in any manner. The plants are arranged in space according to their own will, as interpreted by Niara, but also to ensure they function in accordance with the project's pedagogical guidelines.

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<sup>2</sup> Even in gardens that are exhaustively planned *a priori*, like Aterro do Flamengo (Flamengo Park, in Rio de Janeiro), there is a high degree of unpredictability as to which plants will adapt or not. The botanist in charge, Luiz Emygdio de Mello Filho, who advised Burlle Marx on the implementation of the project, says that they planted many trees from the Atlantic Forest that did not adapt, while certain Amazonian trees, such as the *Abricó de Macaco* (Cannonball tree), adapted incredibly well. Asked about this, he said 'there is no logic in botany', and that is why it is good. (Mello Filho, 2001)

Cultivated in an opening in the land, in a space between concrete buildings and a ten-meter wall, the garden began behind the *Aldeia Vertical* apartment block and slowly expanded, occupying the space at the back of many other buildings in the housing estate. In the midst of 50 four-storey apartment blocks, where there are few non-concrete spaces, the garden stands out from its arid surroundings, with dense planting beds and tall trees, a broad diversity of plants, flowers, insects and birds. As Dauá emphasises in an interview for Martins (2021):

When I arrived here, this building was in very bad state. Sleeping here was really bad. And now, it's not: I lie down and look, look at the birds. It's wonderful. But if we didn't have the hand of an Indian woman, our doctor, planting and doing this work, we wouldn't have this well-being. So, the forest is here. You can do it. [...] Many things have changed; people began to see it and started planting in their homes, improving the entrance to their place, having access to a little indigenous medicine. So, it's changed a lot, and it'll keep changing. Because it's contagious. And it has to be contagious. indigenous culture is meant to be contagious and dominate the planet. Let everyone get back to planting, taking care of the earth and taking care of themselves.

**Figure 2.** The *Dja Guata Porã* garden on one side of the *Aldeia Vertical*.



Source: Authors' archives

### **Composting as practice and compost as theory**

An example of Amerindian production in the environment is the *terra preta de Índio* [lit. indigenous black earth], encountered in several locations of historical indigenous settlements and is considered to be of high productivity, showing that indigenous technologies effected changes in the forest. *Terra preta* is an anthropic, fertile, productive soil created around indigenous settlements. The formation of *terra preta* is demonstrably a consequence of human occupation of the territory, and not its cause, although it is not possible to determine whether or not it is the result of an intentional process. One hypothesis is that this soil is formed by a type of organic waste management similar to composting (Neves et al., 2003).

Several archaeological studies show that there was greater occupation and interference in the landscape of the Amazon than previously imagined, emphasising that the region, known for its biodiversity, is an anthropogenic space (Clement et al., 2015; Balée, 2013). Hence the importance of understanding that this biodiversity was created by the action of these Amerindian populations, and not in spite of them. Authors like Clement et al. (2015) call the process of human interference that leads to increased biodiversity in the forest 'landscape domestication'.

At the *Aldeia Vertical* garden, composting is what makes the garden viable, it is an important practice for cultivation, which here assumes centrality as a concept that helps in understanding the productive mixing among heterogeneous elements. This is because the concept of composting enables us to reflect on the uniqueness of encounters, process adjustments and work in the present time, with the intention to produce fertility in the future. Niara explains that she actually calls it feeding the earth:

People here call it composting. In my house, I learned that it was to improve the earth. To make the earth stronger, to give food to the earth (...). And the objective here is for this garden to be a mixture of what we learn in the city and a little of the things we learned from our family. People want to go back to the past, they're sorry for having spoiled the planet. The earth, the water. We have to start acting, trying to, helping the earth, because when you plant, here, for example... where we planted pigeon pea, when it's next year, at the same time, if you get here the energy will be totally different. It is so with the earth. The earth is happier. I felt like crying because the earth was sad. When you squeeze her, you feel that she has no life, that there's no smell. And when you squeeze her, and that smell comes out, that makes your mouth water, it means she's having a good life.

In addition to a soil fertility practice, composting brings us conceptual reflections that we explore later. Composting is the controlled decomposition of plant and/or animal waste whose purpose is to obtain organic fertilizer (CEPAGRO, 2017). In more detail, composting is the process of reusing organic plant remains, which, decomposed by worms and microorganisms, create a fertilizer that can be used for plants. This results in leachate, or liquid fertilizer, and humus, composed of decomposed organic matter that leaves the soil full of nutrients. Composting can be done in gardens, directly on the land or in apartments, in structures set up for this purpose.

In the *Aldeia Vertical* garden, composting takes place in holes made directly in the ground, close to the wall, where the organic remains from the kitchen of the participants and other residents from the building are placed and covered with earth, they leave the organic waste with Niara so that she can take it to that composter. Over time, these residues decompose and produce humus, used to fertilise the plants in the garden. As it decomposes, this material feeds and renews the earth, which is not very nutritious after years of neglect. Composting is the concrete possibility of inhabiting the ruins (Tsing, 2015), and also an alternative to the use of industrial fertilizers, which cause serious environmental impacts.

Similarly, philosopher Kim Q. Hall (2014) defends compost as an alternative language to purity, arguing that working with what might be seen as *dirt* can eventually make the world more liveable. Composting is completely based on interdependence, in which waste becomes the source of extract for that which will be new food growth. Thus, it is by working on what would previously be discarded that more sustainable options for the future are created. The author suggests that, through attention to eating practices, it is possible to think about the modes in which different bodies relate and how they are constituted. Thus, for Hall, eating practices are spaces for negotiating meanings with regard to community and identity.

In the case of the *Aldeia Vertical* garden, it is also possible to use the figure of compost to consider the trajectories and practices present therein that contrast with perspectives of purity, which we address in the next section, but also in the relationship between the garden, food and health. It is important to point out that the strengthening of bodies based on the benefits offered by the garden does not happen simply through the consumption of plants, but rather through the entire context of bodily and relational involvement with the space. The fact that the *Aldeia Vertical* garden is dedicated to medicinal purposes is central to understanding how it works. These relationships form a dense entanglement of interconnections that generate vitality. In this context, illness is thought of as a weakening of relationships both between humans and between plants and food (Langwick, 2018).

For Niara, taking care of the earth and taking care of her own health are interconnected attitudes, and she tries to teach this to the children who visit the garden. Thus, according to Niara,

[It is] for them [children] to begin creating what we call love for the earth, you love the earth, knowing how you have to treat the earth so that she is always healthy, because that's one way for you to be healthy, distributing what we call universal love, love for all living thing—and plants are alive.

More than merely a source of medicinal properties and supplies, the garden translates a form of care on the part of those who conceived it and the bodily engagement of these people with the garden, which simultaneously accompanies numerous transformations concerning the space and the people. There is what Langwick (2018) calls *vegetal politics*, the objective of which is to support life—whether human or non-human—and what anthropologists Abrahamsson and Bertoni (2014) call *compost politics*. Based on a similar project involving medicinal gardens in Tanzania, Langwick (2018) points out that composting is more than a type of material waste management, it also involves ethical and social factors. For the author, making compost is about cultivating a successive relationship, in which part of the products from the garden return to the soil, making it fertile for new crops, thus establishing a continuous relationship with the vitality of the garden.

Abrahamsson and Bertoni (2014) propose a reflection based on the practice of composting and formulate what they call *compost politics*: 'Compost politics is neither assimilation through identity nor the dream of harmony but rather a mutual domestication of multiple and different activities' (Abrahamsson & Bertoni, 2014:134). For them, composting draws attention to forms of conviviality that are not pleasant or pure, and that can be carried out in different ways—in the soil or in a system of boxes set up for this purpose. Thus, assembling the composter as a system capable of working for this purpose involves not only *putting the parts together*, but also knowing how to separate what needs to be kept apart. Composting is therefore a specific aggregation of beings and mutualistic relationships that leads to the decomposition and reuse of organic material.

Although there is a general process for decomposing vegetables, which involves discarded organic material, earthworms and microorganisms, setting up the composting system is only the first step in a constant process. However, as those who compost know, several common problems can occur when using a composter during the coexistence and transformation process, and there is no general rule that can solve them. An example of this is earthworms, which can escape from the space where composting takes place.

Thus, as the authors indicate, no composting guide is able to provide definitive solutions to problems that may arise, but a guide can suggest possibilities and use stories from previous experiences to solve them. After all, there are numerous variables that affect the balance of a compost, and only through observation and experimentation can each specific compost be maintained. Thus, composting is a constant maintenance process, in which the balance is never completely stable. There is no better guidance for making compost than understanding the experience of other practitioners and creating intimacy with your own specific compost, learning to manage its elements and understanding how they combine.

The composter is affected by the types of food placed in it, by the health of the earthworms and other microorganisms, and by the climatic conditions outside it. To guarantee its proper functioning, it is necessary to make constant adjustments and pay attention to what is going on inside it. Composting is a continuous process of rearrangements and care that seeks to achieve favourable conditions for all the participants to transform together.

Abrahamsson and Bertoni (2014) draw attention to the fact that no manual can explain exactly how to proceed in each case, it is limited to indicating measures that have previously worked in similar situations, but that need to be tested in each specific situation. This is because each compost aggregate is unique and depends on the elements it contains, and on the environment where the process is taking place.

For the proper functioning of this aggregate, multi-specific attention is required, in addition to learning to communicate with earthworms whose language is that of food (Abrahamsson & Bertoni, 2014). The authors draw attention to the fact that the relationship with earthworms is not exactly one of control, and propose that the concept of mastery developed by Fausto (2008) for the Amerindian context can be used to consider composting as an interspecific relationship that involves both control and care, without distinguishing between these categories: 'But our bin is not in Amazonia: what transporting this category of mastery to our bins does for us is to do away with the assumed distinction between control and care' (Abrahamsson & Bertoni, 2014:141).

Fausto underscores this category of mastery as a differential within an Amerindian literature that tends to focus on the horizontality of Amazonian relations. In the category of mastery, according to Fausto (2008), there is an asymmetry between owner and what or who is owned, since the owner is in charge of all the needs of their creatures, and this relationship is not solely one of *control*, but also of *care* – that occurs not only between humans and their pets, but also between the cosmological owners of all other beings in the Amerindian ontology, which implies the ritualisation of hunting and gathering with respect to these owners of animals and plants<sup>3</sup>.

The fact that human discarded food waste is turned into a compost used to create new food leads many people to evoke the idea of a circular system, which Abrahamsson and Bertoni oppose. They argue that composting should not be seen as a perfect cycle, since many transformations occur – and these, in turn, involve adjustments that need to be made throughout the process. Therefore, the operation of composting happens not only through human action, but also the action of all the other beings involved.

The image of a 'cycle,' however, is misleading. In fact, it is too unitary and does not account for non-convergences, differences, and imperfect encounters. If it is true that you can use the compost to grow new vegetables, it is also true that a number of transformations go on in composting, and nothing 'comes back,' nothing is 'the same.' Eating, feeding and composting are transformative and always involve changes, that, although small, require specific solutions to specific problems. (Abrahamsson & Bertoni, 2014:138)

The practice of composting is a multispecific, slow, singular and practice-centred relationship. Contrary to harmonious ideas of coexistence, it is centred on relations of decomposition and reuse, which take place in squalid contexts. Compost politics works with impurities and muddy borders, and there are no general rules to describe it. The production of future fertility from current wastes only occurs through practice and care, to the extent that you understand how it is possible to make a specific aggregate of entities productive: 'Since it is concerned with the tinkering and caring that maintaining the bin involves, the kind of knowing that emerges from vermicomposting advice is a *knowing in practice*' (Abrahamsson & Bertoni, 2014:141).

This same sense of knowing through practice also applies to knowledge concerning the garden, which, as Niara highlights, cannot be reduced to a list of procedures, plant names or indications for their use, since it is much more than that. It is based on an entire mode of attentiveness, relationship and care with plants and within a holistic view of what *treatments and cures* are. This is the reason why ambivalent desires arise in the *Aldeia Vertical* garden: the difficulty in reconciling Niara's desire to publicise her project the right way and at the same time respect the forms of teaching of that space, and not to reduce it to an 'encyclopaedic' knowledge. In contrast, the garden can be seen as a space for plants and people displaced in the urban landscape, such that, what takes place in the garden is *compost politics* as opposed to *the metaphysics of purity*, which provides for stable definitions, whether for people, plants or processes.

3 The thinking on crops and wild plants can be understood from the perspective of Amerindian cosmology (Viveiros de Castro, 2002), in which agency is distributed among different beings, in a context where the very nature of things varies, which the author calls multinaturalism. Hence, certain authors point to ethnographic cases in which human cultivations are often understood as child-raising relationships, as discussed by Lima (2017) and Oliveira (2006). Similarly, in Jamamadi cosmology, plant species usually take prominence, even in relation to animals, as the protagonists of shamanic and perspectivist narratives (Shiratori, 2018).

There is a parallel between the development of the garden and setting up and operating an organic composting system. The *Aldeia Vertical* garden is a project composed of various knowledge collections and the trajectory of encounters among its participants and collaborators. Furthermore, by always gesturing towards practice, it manages to escape conceptual frameworks, rejecting abstract forms that reduce the garden to static terms. It is important to hear accounts and learn from other experiences, but each composting system, and consequently each garden, is unique and can only function properly if you pay attention to its own functioning and if there are hands-on experiments involving constant adjustments (Abrahamsson & Bertoni, 2014).

Just like gardens, no compost is the same as another, and each one can only be understood through the attentiveness and experience of those who dedicate themselves to it. Thus, composting is a constant process and not an end product that mixes up all the differences and eliminates them. Certain by-products of composting, in turn, enable the production of new elements that will again integrate the aggregate – this occurs in a continuous process, but, at the same time, always in transformation. The compost is produced from specific encounters and only through attention to these singularities is it possible to produce a fertile state.

**Figure 3.** Niara do Sol in the garden.



Source: Authors' archives



## Compost against the metaphysics of purity

It is possible to trace a relation between ideals of botanical purity and ethnic purity. Much as there is an idealisation of botanical purity, in which each species has a specific place, there is also an expectation of ethnic purity linked to spatiality. Thus, indigenous people are seen as displaced in the city by a common sense that assumes that their place is in the forest (distant in space) or in the pre-colonial past (distant in time). Indigenous city-dwellers are also often seen as ‘mixed’ in relation to those who are ‘purer’, who have had less contact with white culture. Each of these are mistaken ideas, which postulate the fixity and passivity of indigenous culture, and according to which there is no possibility for displacements and transformations, as occurs in other cultures (Sahlins, 1997).

In the *Aldeia Vertical*, residents commonly use the categories *aldeados*/*desaldeados* (Bevilaqua, 2017). These are situational categories, wherein *aldeado* refers to someone who comes from a village, even if they do not reside there, while *dealdeado* refers to those who do not come from a village. *Desaldeados* may represent a different experience of Indigeneity, but not one that is *lesser* or *greater*. In this sense, it is important to remember that spatial displacements certainly form part of the trajectory of most residents at *Aldeia Vertical*, but it is a mistake to assume the existence of a unidirectional movement—from the villages to the city (Bevilaqua, 2017). This mistaken assumption, that displacement always occurs toward the city, accompanies the idea of a loss of indigenous culture through contact with white culture. In both cases, movement is always towards a white, urban reality; urbanisation accompanies progressive acculturation.

However, in addition to starting from a static concept of culture, this logic ignores the experience of numerous participants in urban indigenous movements born in cities, who seek to return to the villages and reclaim their culture. In many cases the movement is the reverse of that initially assumed, involving complex movements to and from villages. It is important to be attentive to these different migrations, seeking to understand their specificities, without relying on abstract assumptions that paralyse the movement.

The trajectories and biographies of the people who compose the *Aldeia Vertical* and the garden indicate the importance of thinking through other theoretical paradigms than those of miscegenation or pure identity<sup>4</sup>. Niara, for example, was raised by indigenous parents and grandparents though in a mostly white town, where she went to school with white children and had to take lessons in etiquette. Niara says that she had to learn the manners of white people very well in order not to suffer discrimination. She always indicates what she learned from her parents and what she learned from white people. These learnings take place in parallel, and she is able to alternate between these forms of white and indigenous sociality without implying that they are confounded. This dual operation, however, does not involve a mixture nor does it make Niara any less indigenous.

In the *Aldeia Vertical* garden, the collection of plants also possesses diverse origins that can hardly be summarised by the category ‘native plants’, rather it is a veritable cornucopia of species brought from different places—the ancestry therein was not only inherited, but actively produced and designed for the future. Niara’s familial knowledge is not a fixed, closed framework, but rather an open form of doing and teaching, which always enable the incorporation of new knowledge, new practices, new plants, and new treatments.

Many of the objectives of the *Aldeia Vertical* garden are illustrated by the artichoke, since when they were eventually cultivated in the garden, they became the subject of didactic conversations. In many ways, the artichoke seems to sum up multiple meanings of the garden, as Niara explains:

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4 The relation between the *Aldeia Vertical*, indigenous people in the city and anti-miscegenation theories have previously been discussed elsewhere (Bevilaqua, 2017). While anti-miscegenation emerges as an antidote to the ideology of miscegenation, emphasising the relations between Indigenous and white people from an Indigenous point of view (or the Black-Indigenous relation, in the case of counter-miscegenation (Goldman, 2015)), composite theories arise in opposition to ethnic or botanical ideals of purity, assisting our understanding of multi-ethnic and multi-species contexts.

(Some people say:) Oh, but Indians don't use artichoke. Indians from Brazil! But there are Indians elsewhere who use it. And artichoke treats the liver. But people who have access to artichokes here in the city only include those who have very high purchasing power, because one artichoke costs 20 reais [US\$ 4-5]. One! And it's a tiny tree that provides one portion. So, if you show people the purpose of planting artichoke, it's not just because of the beauty of the tiny tree, it tells people that they can plant them in their backyard and have something that treats the liver, which at the same time is a sophisticated delicacy, one that my neighbour, who earns one minimum wage and owns a piece of land, can have. And what [does that mean] to her, do you know? She receives a visitor and serves them an artichoke? She's serving food that is treating her visitor. So, these are the things that we want people, the city hall, the state, to understand that this is what we're doing.

It is worth adding that the artichoke serves as an example to illustrate the most varied intentions of the people who take care of the garden: knowledge of new foods, self-care – which comes from knowing the plants' properties – and the autonomy of being able to plant them. It is difficult to *consolidate* this knowledge in writing, much like *cataloguing* the plants and treatments, since everything is always in motion, adapting to each specific situation. The artichoke also exemplifies this multiplicity with regard to different plant naming systems:

It's funny that you start planting and discover a series of things. There was a gentleman here last week, so we came here and when we walked over there, he said: 'You planted the St. Benedict plants.' And I replied, 'What do you mean?' Then he said: 'this is from St. Benedict. The artichoke.'

To counter the idea of defined origins, the garden has the logic of composts, aggregates of plants, people and beings of diverse origins. The complexity of the debate can be perceived in other accounts by Niara, who denies the idea of the precise origins of each species and casts doubt on whether such a thing can be proven due to the number of displacements suffered by all plants. Along these lines, she complains about the idea – the common sense – that indigenous people only exist in the Amazon, frequently using the concept of *native* to affirm that they were *the first peoples from everywhere in the world* –, meaning that all the knowledge she has acquired was originally indigenous –, as well as to denote the healing system she teaches and practices, which she calls *native symbols*.

For many of its participants, the *Aldeia Vertical* garden is a way to get involved with their ancestry and to understand themselves as indigenous, providing connections that are often unexpected. Dauá, an important figure in the Puri resurgence movement, evokes the image of 'dormant seeds that sprout again', to articulate this hidden ancestry and an indigenous identity that is reclaimed. One day, when students were visiting the garden, Dauá sat down with the students and began to tell the story of his family and how he researched his indigenous origins in the interior of the States of Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais as an adult.

As Dauá spoke, one of the students began asking him questions, asking for details, such as the exact names and cities where each person lived. The young woman seemed especially interested in the subject and asked Dauá what his father's name was. When she heard his reply, the young woman burst into tears and said that that was her family too.

Very moved, she and Dauá embraced. Everyone in the room also became emotional while watching the encounter. The young woman said that she never really understood the history of her family, and that when she met Niara, she thought that she had a very similar way of being to that of her grandmother. From that moment on, the young woman began to gather facts and ask Dauá more questions to understand exactly what the connection was between them. Dauá spoke about her family genealogy, recollecting her uncles and grandparents. And though the student was very moved, Dauá remained calm the whole time, and calmed her down. He did not seem at all surprised to have accidentally found one of his family in the middle of a group visiting the garden. Dauá then talked to her about going together to visit the town where their family lived.

Another example of the potential of encounters that take place in the garden is the story of Jonas and Escovino, two friends who began to frequent the garden at the same time and who became involved to the point that, at a certain moment they became the main helpers. In addition to caring for and organising the garden, over time, Jonas became more involved in learning about the medicinal qualities of the plants, learning from Niara about her treatments and accompanying her on appointments. In contrast, Escovino adopted the more practical side, getting to know all the plants well and using seedlings from the nursery to create his own garden in Marechal Hermes, the neighbourhood where he lives and where he mainly sought to engage the elderly residents.

Both lived in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro and met Niara at an event that brought together different religious groups. Niara was one of the representatives of indigenous religions and Jonas and Escovino were present because they have links to Umbanda. When they met Niara, they became interested in her work at the garden and began to frequent the place. Jonas ended up moving to *Aldeia Vertical* and initially moved in with Dauá and Niara, and then into his own apartment at the MCMV. During this experience, he began to look into his family's indigenous ancestry, a path he continues to follow.

This role played by gardens – reclaiming and creating relationships – was also perceived by researcher Laura Hall (2015) when she recalls the experience of being in her mother's garden:

My mother's garden is both the garden around the home where my Haudenosaunee-French mother raised my brothers and me, but it can also be considered in a wider sense—the garden as a creation within Creation—evoking not only cultural lineage but territorial histories and stories that can serve to renew fractured cultural and ecological connectivity. (Hall, 2015:283)

The garden thus emerges as a space for renewing connections, a place where new spaces are created in the elaboration of Indigeneity, functioning, as Laura Hall puts it, as a way of reclaiming these fragmented connections – both cultural and ecological. In this case, discussing fragmentation is not a delegitimisation, but rather a recognition of the existence of different contexts. Perhaps it is important to think of these fragments as Strathern (1988) uses the concept, recollecting that fragments do not assume a whole. It is the assumption of a totality, or, in this instance, of a pristine Indigeneity, which leads to the potential delegitimisation of people who are outside the imagined ideal. Therefore, recognising Indigeneity as fragmented intergenerational efforts is important to avoid reducing the indigenous movement to static, outdated ideas.

To be able to live the experience of the garden and understand the way its participants think and act requires us to abandon ideas of purity and embrace the complexity that exists in specific encounters and trajectories, without relapsing into broad reductionisms. The *Aldeia Vertical* garden is based strongly on local, native knowledge, which is not intended to be 'traditional', since they are open to using various 'external' resources that can assist in the treatments offered.

Understanding the idea of compost is also possible through that considered to be its opposite, which the philosopher Alexis Shotwell (2016) calls the *metaphysics of purity*, present in numerous modern discourses. For her, in many of these discourses there is a claim to purity, hence the search for a kind of cleanliness—of bodies, land, food and even history. The author also argues that it is necessary to think in terms of complicity and situational commitment, since there are no choices or actions disconnected from a larger context and that it is not possible, for example, to be exempt in relation to global processes of food and energy production. In this sense, she criticises the fact that collective ethical concerns are transformed into issues of individual consumption.

The idea of a purified body is reminiscent of a Garden of Eden—an image of a less morally complicated time sold in different products and lifestyles. Therefore, according to the author, it is important to remember that to live is to be involved with the lives of many other beings in entanglements that, in turn, always imply complicity,

making it impossible to reach an unattainable state of purity, whether bodily or moral: ‘We’re complicit, implicated, tied in to things we abjure. This is a kind of impurity implied in the sense of “compromised living” that involves making concessions’ (2016:7).

The discourses analysed by Alexis Shotwell are not those with a presumption of modernity, which reject hybridisms, but rather criticisms of modernity. The author not only shows the error of this search for purity, but also considers it inefficient and demobilising in terms of fighting real problems:

A central argument of this book is, of course, that personal purity is simultaneously inadequate, impossible, and politically dangerous for shared projects of living on earth. While personal purity may be a winnable aim in some ethical situations, it is impossible in situations such as energy use, climate change, and eating. (2016:107)

One case analysed in her book refers precisely to food choices. For the philosopher, eating is necessarily an act of choosing how to relate to the surrounding world, which also leads us to the question of the co-constitution of bodies, which are always intertwined with other beings. As she says, it is impossible not to eat and it is impossible not to make choices when eating, and it is also necessary to deal with the by-products of food, the energy used for transportation and the waste generated.

With regard to food production and consumption, Kim Hall (2014) also argues against assumptions of purity in individual choice when it comes to food. The author argues that it is an illusion to imagine that there are ‘pure foods’ or that good food is just natural, free from artificial ingredients and subject to individual control, as if it were not involved in a network of relationships. According to her, ‘real food security requires food justice, not the illusion of self-sufficiency’.

Returning to the *Dja Guatá Porã* garden, even though there is an approximation with environmentalist practices, the issue of organic, natural or vegan discourses is viewed with scepticism by Niara and other participants in the garden. A number of times the dangers of certain plants are highlighted, indicating that ‘just because something’s natural, doesn’t mean it’s not harmful’. In many conversations about healthy eating, Niara, Jonas and other garden participants find vegetarianism and veganism funny, and when the term comes up, everyone there laughs at the idea of ‘organic’ food and asks *what foods are not organic*<sup>5</sup>.

In the metaphysics of compost, proposed by Kim Hall in opposition to a metaphysics of purity, food is understood not only as a substance that is eaten, but as a focus of relationships (Heldke *apud* Hall, 2014). According to the author, the metaphysics of compost enable you to consider relationships as a network ‘not all of which can be repaired through “good” choices and not all of which can be known or assumed in advance’ (2014, p. 190).

This approach to food as a focus of relationships is highlighted in a number of studies on Amerindian peoples (Vilaça, 1992; Costa, 2013). In these ethnographies, food can be both the focus of differences between beings and the producer of similar relationships and bodies through commensality. These questions appear when Niara talks about her relationship with the birds in the garden: ‘There are two papaya trees here. One is for the birds, the other is ours.’ or ‘This is chia. You know? The birds made a deal with me: that I eat the leaves and they eat the seeds.’ In other cases, food is a matter of dispute:

5 In the *Aldeia Vertical* garden constant variation occurs between two concepts of culture, as conceptualised by Manuela Carneiro da Cunha. According to the anthropologist, culture without quotation marks refers to ‘internalised schemes that organise people’s perception and actions’ (2009:313). In contrast, ‘culture’ with quotation marks is the representation that a group forms of itself in an interethnic context, a reflexive metalanguage, principally in situations where patrimonialisation, traditional knowledges and collective property are negotiated. We observed that the *Aldeia Vertical* garden is organised according to culture, following teachings passed down by different generations, while also incorporating new elements whenever necessary. In moments that require an explanation for collaborators and outsiders, however, ‘culture’ comes into play, when the organisers need to mobilise concepts to try to clarify how the space functions and engage the participants around a common imagination.

The birds don't understand why, no matter how much I talk and explain: they don't understand. They think I can only eat the leaves, and the seeds are theirs. So far, they haven't left any seeds for me, they eat them all, like a blackberry bush. They don't understand that I need to eat one of those berries, they're rude. They could say: 'Let's leave a little bit for her, she planted it, especially since she's already planted another patch over there.'

As we emerge from composting, we propose that the concept of compost implies both a mode of relationship, in the sense defended by Hall, that is, as an agency of heterogeneous elements 'that is constantly being transformed by these relationships' (Deleuze *apud* Hall, 2014), but also implies a constant process of attention to ongoing transformations, potentially transforming waste into food for the earth, microorganisms, fungi and earthworms, and later for plants, animals and humans.

From another perspective, Tsing (2015) works with the concept of *contaminated diversity* to discuss fragmented and complex ethnic identities. Contamination is the idea that all encounters change worlds in common, the paths and trajectories of those involved. The idea of contamination seeks to counter the imagination of purity and self-contained identities. Tsing says that *survival* requires collaboration and that *living together* entails contamination. And, as seen, the word *collaboration* is defined as *living together*, and not necessarily as a concept of harmony and cooperation. Tsing argues that 'contaminated diversity' is the most common form of ethnic identity, but that, politically, it is a more difficult concept to work with than reducing people to identity categories.

The idea of collaboration was used by Jonas, one of Niara's apprentices, one day when presenting the garden to visitors:

From the least loved to the most loved: rats of n qualities and sizes have turned up. Snails. The worker bees of the Workers' Party. Butterflies, I think they don't work, but they beautify the environment. There is also a breeding site here for low-flying birds... youngsters, right? Hawks... and us humans.

Together with non-humans, humans enter the list of space producers and users, and some of the non-humans are considered to be as legitimate producers and users as the humans in the space. The rats and snails, which do not contribute to the growth of the garden, are fought, while others (pollinators, birds, etc.) form part of the construction of the garden space and can enjoy it alongside the humans.

As already observed, the birds are important characters, and are mentioned by Niara and Dauá in different accounts as elements that indicate the transformation of the previous landscape, which occurred following the implementation of the garden. This is because the fact of seeing and hearing birds indicates that that space now has more life, it is less arid. In this sense, the birds are indicators that there is a fruitful, green environment with plants, trees, flowers and seeds.

At another time, Niara justified the presence of a certain plant, the shrimp plant, due to its usefulness—not for humans, but for hummingbirds:

Over there is that shrimp plant. Why is this shrimp plant there and another that I planted up front? Because it's the food that hummingbirds like the most. We had a hummingbird that stayed here with us for ten days. They get sick and the birds come looking for us at the window to be treated.

In the case of the garden, whether a plant is native or exotic is not the criterion that defines whether it is planted. However, it is worth noting that the very conceptualisation of 'native' has raised several questions in the field of botany, with emphasis on criticisms of the so-called metaphysics of purity. Recently, in the United States, movements in favour of native vegetation have been associated with xenophobic anti-immigration movements, when identifying invasive plants as illegal immigrants. This fact led scientists to discuss the very concept of 'native', both in the social sciences and in the field of botany, a debate that is reviewed by Mastanak et al (2014). The authors argue that 'planting and displacing humans and plants are elements of the same

multispecies colonial endeavor' (Mastanak et al., 2014:363). Rejecting, on the one hand, the total relativism of botanical cosmopolitanism and, on the other, an ideal of the purity of nativism, the authors suggest that cases should always be analysed in their ecological and historical context. Validating the importance of the debate on native species as a discursive field, they also indicate that humans can be seen as a species that disturbs the ecological balance of the planet, particularly in the context of the Anthropocene.

As an alternative to the dilemmas of the Anthropocene, Haraway (2016) speaks of the need to overcome the idea of an individual delimited and separated from an external environment, both in biology and philosophy. To achieve this, she proposes the idea of compost as a means to form unexpected collaborations and combinations. Here, again, Strathern's idea that *relationships exist prior to individuals* is essential (1988). When thinking of the Chthulucene – the name that Haraway gives to the Anthropocene – the author resorts to the concept of the *banality of evil*, used by Arendt when speaking about the Eichmann trial. According to her, what characterises the banality of evil is the lack of thought concerning relationships.

In this case, it is not necessarily active cruel intent that leads to the perpetration of monstrosities, but rather thoughtlessness with regard to the implication of yourself with other beings and a levity in regard to the consequences of actions. It is interesting to note that Eichmann could not attain compost thinking, in the sense of making something present that was not there, of thinking beyond himself and taking responsibility for his part in a larger aggregate which he was part of and acted in.

Here was someone who could not be a wayfarer, could not entangle, could not track the lines of living and dying, could not cultivate response-ability, could not make present to itself what it is doing, could not live in consequences or with consequence, *could not compost*. Function mattered, duty mattered, but the world did not matter for Eichmann. (Haraway, 2016:36; emphasis added)

Blindness in relation to everyone's involvement in an entanglement of relationships prevents awareness of the impacts of the Chthulucene. As an alternative to this way of thinking and not getting involved, Haraway draws attention to processes of *becoming-with*, in which reciprocal relationships of complicity exist. From the author's perspective, in order to stay with the problem you need to make new relatives, and, in this case, making relatives means creating non-human relationships — hence the slogan 'Make Kin Not Babies!' (Haraway, 2016): 'Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all' (Haraway, 2016:4).

Compost reappears here as a figure that represents this aggregate of relationships: a mixed, heterogeneous pile with great creative power. And despite being a project to build future potential from past forms, compost must always be a process carried out in the present and is always, by definition, a specific aggregate and cannot be generalised. Each input generates a different product, and attention to specificities is the only possible tool to *becoming-with*.

The *Aldeia Vertical* – a multi-ethnic village inhabited by indigenous peoples of different ethnicities – can also be thought of relative to compost politics, as a heterogeneous aggregate of people and cultures with different life trajectories, as mentioned above. In this context, the garden emerges as a fertile space for indigenous culture through the aggregation of diverse elements.

Niara and Dauá have plural trajectories. Niara was rigorously taught by her older relatives regarding indigenous healing practices, while also attending school for white children. In contrast, Dauá never received such stimuli from his family, so he was the one who had to *go after* his history, once he became an adult, seeking to regain knowledge that would otherwise have been lost. Now he can bring that to other people.

The idea that Niara's entire lived experience in the city does not diminish her indigeneity was clearly expressed on the day when she was talking about her helpers while we were maintaining the garden. She said that they needed to expand their knowledge, but that they were reticent. Niara reaffirmed that 'leaving their

worlds' and getting to know new things would be good for Jonas and Escovino and would not cause them to lose their identity—this while drawing a comparison with herself, who as 'an indigenous woman, does everything she does, and has not lost her essence'. Thus, encounters with otherness do not lead to a displacement of previous learning or family history.

Reflecting on spaces for the propagation of indigenous cultures—breaking away from the idea of static knowledge—, one alternative comes from Ingold's (2010) definition of learning contexts. The author proposes that we think of knowledge not as a collection of information, but as training our attention. He underscores that attention is not acquired passively, but relearned by each person in their interaction with the environment. Thus, what each culture provides are activities and contexts in which this specific attention can be formed from practice and guided rediscovery, enabling a new generation to bond with the previous generation.

Indigenous villages may be the context where these learnings more commonly occur, while in the city although not impossible, it requires a lot of study and tenacity, as shown by Niara and Dauá. These two seek to create spaces and narratives in the city that enable this type of attention training, and the *Aldeia Vertical* garden emerges as an attempt to create a learning context that can train people to pay attention to plants—the same way that Niara learned with her grandfather.

It is not without friction among the different collaborators that the garden environment is constructed as a learning space. As indicated above, *collaboration* does not mean *agreement* and some situations discussed here, like the birds, demonstrate this friction among project collaborators.

## Conclusion

The *Aldeia Vertical* garden is a unique project. In its space of acting, it seeks to operate under a different concept of producing worlds, forming a more inclusive and sustainable landscape for both humans and non-humans. There seems to be a common point between garden practices and multi-species theories with respect to living with non-humans and the consequences of human actions in their environment.

Regarding the effects of human action on the environment, the garden organisers and participants constantly express their concern and criticism. However, to us, their prognosis does not seem to be catastrophic, maintaining their focus on the problems of the present and on the type of education that can resolve these issues, avoiding fatalistic predictions for the future. Based on local actions, garden participants believe it is possible to combat these problems and contribute to the success of a broader recovery movement – even though this is not easy, as we have explained here. At the *Aldeia Vertical* garden, they believe in building a more multiple, more indigenous future.

In many senses – and in the terms of Bruno Latour (2017) –, the *garden* seems to be an attempt to construct a shared world; a risky diplomatic initiative, proposed by *people who do not claim to be modern* and who do not seek to *purify the world*. This is an initiative that aims to translate knowledge and disseminate them, with a view to solving the problems of so-called modernity. In this sense, the *Aldeia Vertical* garden carries out vigorous work, that of drawing people's attention to the landscape<sup>6</sup>, as well as caring for the earth and bodies – all of this in an environment that is the victim of much neglect on the part of public powers.

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6 In the case of the Piro people (Gow, 1991), the production of landscape and kinship is also intertwined. 'The production of kinship involves a historical process of transforming the forest landscape to make swiddens and villages where the new generations are raised. The production of relatives occurs through the care taken to raise children. This work is carried out in the production of subsistence, food, the swidden, fishing in the river, tasks divided between the husband and wife. It is the memory of the care received in childhood that creates and maintains relationships between people who consider themselves true relatives inside the village.' (Bevilaqua, 2017).

For such an endeavour, the idea of compost – as a heterogeneous aggregate of things reused to generate renewed potentiality – is central. Each compost is different and can only be managed based on attention to a specific situation, even though it can be supported by observations of similar cases. The work in the garden seems to be in agreement with Tsing’s practice, in that it is not despairing in the face of the destruction of the landscape, but uses the ruins and its residues, transforming them into a substrate with the power to restore its vitality. In fact, it is about *staying with the trouble* (Haraway, 2016), while creating a *compost politics* from vegetal logic.

The power of composting is also highlighted by Haraway, who applies both the concept of collaboration and the *figure of compost*—used recurrently as an image that emphasises interconnection and the possibilities of constructing new connections from scrapped materials.

My partner Rusten Hogness suggested compost instead of posthuman(ism), as well as humusities instead of humanities, and I jumped into that wormy pile. Human as humus has potential, if we could chop and shred human as Homo, the detumescing project of a self-making and planet-destroying CEO. (Haraway, 2016:32)

Composting, as a practice carried out in the garden, also allowed us to analyse the importance of its singularities with regard to the vegetal and human trajectories developed there. Thus, the *Aldeia Vertical* garden operates through compost politics, constantly reaffirming the plural character of its human and non-human participants, without falling into the traps of the metaphysics of purity.

In this space, uniqueness is in evidence both among the plants and among the individuals. Each seedling of a vegetable and each person who engages therein is seen as a unique being, with their own history and trajectory. And the important thing is not their classification, but rather their knowledge of plants and their uses based on a close, intimate, unique relationship. Rejecting *purity*, the garden operates as *compost*. The beings there are constantly recognised for their complex and interdependent character, just as – and through composting – the mixture is seen as a power for the renovation of the garden.

At a time when the level of consumption and waste production has been identified as having a major impact on the Earth, the idea that something considered waste can become a nutrient for the creation of new life is potent. Thus, we reinforce the image posited by Haraway: ‘We are humus, not Homo, not anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman’ (2016: 55).

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# Reciclaje de plásticos en Uruguay: realidades y complejidades

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## Resumen

En las últimas décadas, el papel del plástico en la economía global ha aumentado considerablemente, y ello se debe en gran medida a sus propias cualidades. El principal inconveniente de este material es la dificultad que presenta para su eliminación o reciclado. Desde la disciplina antropológica como ciencia comprometida en develar todas las manifestaciones culturales y sociales de la sociedad, el reciclaje de residuos plásticos es tema de tratamiento de esta era antropocénica. Por ese motivo, este trabajo sobre el reciclaje de plásticos en Uruguay no escapa a la realidad vivida en sus descartes, procesos y futuros utópicos posibles.

**Palabras claves:** plásticos, propiedades, reciclaje, proceso, cadena reciclaje.

# Plastic recycling in Uruguay: realities and complexities

## **Abstract**

In recent decades, the role of plastic in the global economy has increased considerably and this is largely due to its own qualities. The main drawback of this material is the difficulty it presents for its disposal or recycling. From the anthropological discipline as a science committed to revealing all the cultural and social manifestations of society, the recycling of plastic waste is the subject of treatment of this anthropocene era, so this work on the recycling of plastics in Uruguay does not escape the vivid reality in its discards, processes and possible utopian futures.

**Keywords:** plastics, properties, recycling, process, recycling chain.

# Reciclagem de plásticos no Uruguai: realidades e complexidades

## **Resumo**

Nas últimas décadas, o papel do plástico na economia global aumentou consideravelmente, e isso se deve em grande parte às suas próprias qualidades. A principal desvantagem desse material é a dificuldade que apresenta para sua eliminação ou reciclagem. Desde a disciplina antropológica como uma ciência comprometida em revelar todas as manifestações culturais e sociais da sociedade, a reciclagem de resíduos plásticos é o tema de tratamento desta era antropocênica, portanto, este trabalho sobre a reciclagem de plásticos no Uruguai não escapa à realidade vívida em seus descartes, processos e futuros utópicos possíveis.

**Palavras-chave:** plásticos, propriedades, reciclagem, processo, cadeia de reciclagem.

# Reciclaje de plásticos en Uruguay: realidades y complejidades

Sonia Gau Angelo and Esther Mayara Zamboni Rossi

## Introducción

El presente trabajo está basado en datos etnográficos a partir de entrevistas a distintos actores que conforman la cadena del reciclaje de plásticos en la ciudad de Las Piedras en el departamento de Canelones, Uruguay. Con una mirada interdisciplinaria, se pretende hacer visibles las particularidades y complejidades de ese proceso (reciclaje), así como sus desafíos y oportunidades, temas que interesan a la antropología como ciencia comprometida en develar todas las manifestaciones sociales y culturales de la sociedad.

Para realizarlo se tomaron en cuenta observaciones en diferentes contextos que se relacionan con la cadena de reciclaje de plásticos; donde me posiciono como observadora no solo como participante en tanto investigador-ciudadano, sino desde lo observacional propiamente dicho, dentro de un marco cultural que me es propio, dado mi lugar de residencia y mi rol de actor social en cuanto a generadora de plásticos para el reciclaje. También se realizaron visitas a lugares específicos (sitios de depósitos de reciclables), espacios públicos, comercios, empresa transformadora, ONG, contextualizando cada lugar según su particularidad.

Si bien la metodología de abordaje etnográfico es la que aporta los datos indagando y recolectando información, las entrevistas abiertas y no direccionadas permitieron entretejer un diálogo de comunicación confidencial y espontánea. De esa forma se pudo acceder a la inmersión en el mundo de otros.

Este trabajo se sustenta en el discurso de actores sociales que se relacionan con el tema del reciclaje de plásticos desde sus distintos lugares, como forma de aporte a la comprensión de dinámicas socioculturales, económicas y ambientales del tema en cuestión, y que nos remiten al Antropoceno como era del plástico.

A su vez, el carácter holístico que presenta la disciplina antropológica es lo que permite analizar esas distintas dimensiones del proceso de reciclaje. A este respecto, Velasco y Díaz de Rada señalan:

Casi todo el trabajo de campo es un ejercicio de observación y entrevista (...) para poder así captar (...) los comportamientos y los pensamientos, las acciones y las normas, los hechos y las palabras, la realidad y el deseo. La observación y la entrevista son dos modos básicos de obtener información, o más bien de producirla. (Velasco y Díaz de Rada, 2006, p. 33)

Partimos de la idea de Antropoceno, pero problematizándolo a partir del concepto de Wasteoceno. Pues bien, en nuestra sociedad de consumo, los discursos sobre reciclaje y reducción de generación de residuos son habituales en las redes sociales, en las escuelas y en los anuncios de productos ecológicos. Parte de un giro ecológico que se remonta a décadas atrás y que se intensificó en los años 2000 con el surgimiento de la crisis climática y la difusión masiva del tema en la prensa. De esta manera es recurrente la construcción de una prerrogativa del “nosotros” como humanidad. Las marcas interesadas en participar en las discusiones actuales realizan lo que se llama “greenwashing” (De Freitas Netto et al., 2020). La mayoría exaltan las iniciativas y responsabilidades individuales que *deberías* elegir asumir. Una espiral de deseo y culpa por el consumo, que excluye el engranaje mismo del capitalismo de su papel en la degradación ambiental.

No se puede dejar de mencionar las transformaciones en los procesos de producción que realmente marcan una diferencia para el medioambiente como experiencias ricas que deben fomentarse. Esta producción no puede individualizarse ni compararse con parámetros idénticos, ya que la producción de residuos está relacionada

con los tipos de productos consumidos y, más que eso, con las industrias ubicadas en cada territorio. Después de todo, muchas de las prerrogativas ecológicas seguidas por los países europeos no son cumplidas por sus empresas en territorios fuera de la zona del euro, lo que podemos llamar colonialismo ambiental.<sup>1</sup> En este sentido, consideramos importante el concepto de Wasteoceno o en portugués Lixoceno, ya que es resultado de discusiones sobre justicia ambiental y no está desplazado de los contextos particulares de los diferentes grupos sociales. Según Armiero, Wasteoceno es

a narrative linking waste, justice, and the making of our present world. The Wasteocene is, evidently, in dialogue with the explosion of academic and arts debates and events around the Anthropocene. The Wasteocene can be enlisted among the creative alternatives to the Anthropocene which have bloomed especially among environmental humanities scholars who were unsatisfied with the overly neutral flavor of the “Age of Humans” (Armiero y De Angelis apud Malm & Hornborg, 2014: p. 1).

The Wasteocene assumes that waste can be considered the planetary mark of our new epoch. However, this is not solely because of its ubiquitous presence —after all, even CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are basically atmospheric waste— rather, I argue that what makes the Wasteocene are the wasting relationships, those really planetary in their scope, which produce wasted people and places (Armiero y De Angelis, 2017, p. 2).

Los residuos como parte de la sociedad no están separados de ella y de todos sus procesos de eliminación que incluyen lugares y animales humanos y no humanos. Según Armiero, la práctica colonial inherente a nuestras relaciones es la del “otro” o la producción del otro, que se produce en el choque entre el “forastero” y el “nosotros” (Armiero y De Angelis, 2017, p. 2)

The Wasteocene is to coloniality what the Anthropocene is to the species discourse, now so cherished by Chakrabarty (2009). We might say that “othering”, that is, the colonial production of the other, and “saming”, that is, the rhetorical invention of the “us”, are two sides of the same coin. The othering produced through wasting is more pervasive than the making of sacrifice zones. Othering means to change the “nature” of the other while simultaneously using it to preserve a privilege (Armiero y De Angelis, 2017, p. 2).

El Lixoceno es una forma radical y crítica de llevar a cabo el debate sobre el Antropoceno, teniendo en cuenta que la “Era del Hombre” tiene residuos en todos los ámbitos. Según Armiero, los residuos son la esencia del Antropoceno, por eso él y Massimo De Angelis propusieron este término. Además de los datos cuantitativos, el punto de vista del Wasteoceno comprende los residuos y no solo el objeto desperdiciado.

“The Wasteocene, then, is not the age where waste is everywhere; it is not a fancy academic label for lamenting the dirtiness of our cities. Neither is it another word for the familiar environmentalist nostalgia for some paradise, lost in the past. Actually, the Wasteocene is about cleanliness and aseptic environments as much as it is about griminess and contamination. Because at its very essence, wasting implies sorting out what has value and what does not” (Armiero y De Angelis, 2017, p. 11).

<sup>1</sup> “La explotación de los recursos naturales y la extracción de las riquezas (minerales, humanas, energéticas y biológicas), la destrucción del medioambiente y de las epistemologías relacionadas, han sido tradicionalmente consideradas como manifestaciones primarias del colonialismo. Esta dimensión fundamental del colonialismo, denominada por Mattei y Nader (2008) como *Plunder* o saqueo, puede ser evidenciada a través de los distintos procesos históricos de colonización y dominación emprendidos por el Norte Global alrededor del mundo. Un recorrido histórico a través de las distintas oleadas del colonialismo nos mostrará que, a pesar de las posibles transformaciones de las estrategias de colonización, uno de los fines primarios del mismo reside en el saqueo y explotación de las riquezas de los países/territorios colonizados” (Atilés-Osoria, 2013, p.135).

La dicotomía del capitalismo se manifiesta en todos los procesos, incluido nuestro cuerpo, el metabolismo sociológico del sistema es intrínsecamente tóxico. Por tanto, el residuo es inherentemente histórico porque implica la persistencia de desechos, desde animales humanos y no humanos hasta lugares. En este sentido, esta comprensión vuelve a colocar los conceptos de desperdicio en el terreno, en el campo de la materialidad, sin dejar de vislumbrar sus significados subjetivos.

## **Aproximaciones teóricas del reciclaje**

Como argumenta Miller (2001), el estudio del consumo y las mercancías ha significado desde la antropología un hecho transformador de la disciplina. Para este autor, desde la visión antropológica, el consumo de cosas materiales juega en el mantenimiento de las relaciones y la cultura. El consumo está incrustado en las relaciones sociales. Ya Douglas e Isherwood (1979) habían expresado: “Los bienes son necesarios para hacer visibles y estables las categorías de una cultura... al mismo tiempo, las mercancías tienen otro importante uso: sirven para establecer y mantener relaciones sociales” (pp. 7475).

Para Michael Thompson, la basura depende de quién la ve y así la llama, la decisión de qué es o no basura está mayoritariamente en manos de quienes tienen más poder. En esta definición se encuentra la distinción entre tres categorías de objetos, los duraderos, los transitorios y los sin valor, este último es la categoría de basura. Estos objetos sin valor son los que no encajan en nuestra visión del mundo y, por lo tanto, son rechazados (Rial, 2016, p. 19).

Según Luiz Marques, la naturaleza no produce basura, pero sí metamorfosis y nutrientes. En la era industrial, las secreciones de los animales humanos tienen una escala y un ritmo intensos, además de ser químicamente estables. Esto produjo un cambio en los ciclos de los ecosistemas. La industria química y petroquímica y las nuevas tecnologías potencian la producción de residuos, con su forma de expansión y apropiación de los ecosistemas, produciendo una cantidad de residuos nunca antes vista, es decir, como señala el autor, una interacción tóxica y activa (Marques, 2015).

Un ejercicio interesante es analizar todo el proceso de un objeto a modo de biografía, dándose cuenta así de que la mayoría de las veces los objetos son predominantemente identificados como basura. El tiempo de utilización del objeto como producto no se compara con el tiempo hasta su total degradación. La importancia de un acercamiento biográfico a los objetos radica en la posibilidad de cuestionar su utilidad, duración y marcadores culturales.

Un dato muy importante para entender cómo los residuos son una parte importante de la administración municipal es el tamaño del presupuesto gastado en la recogida y eliminación de residuos. En los países de bajos ingresos, los municipios gastan entre el 20 y el 50 % de su presupuesto en la gestión de residuos (Marques, 2015). Cuando esta información se combina con el hecho de que el servicio se ofrece a menos de la mitad de la población mundial, la contradicción y las preguntas aumentan.

De hecho, la demanda de residuos es, en cierto modo, un asunto de las ciudades, aunque no se centra en el entorno urbano. Es en este espacio donde se produce uno de los mayores volúmenes. Está claro que las consecuencias de una eliminación inadecuada, así como del aumento de la producción, afectan a todo el planeta. Generalmente, el foco de la discusión de este dilema global está en el entorno urbano, pero vale la pena señalar los procesos problemáticos que se encuentran en las zonas rurales, en los océanos e incluso en las unidades de conservación. Ejemplos impactantes del avance de la acumulación de residuos en el planeta son recurrentes en los medios de comunicación, por ejemplo, la situación de la Antártida y el Monte Everest, lugares considerados alejados de toda suciedad, que reciben anualmente expediciones para recoger toneladas de residuos (Rial, 2016, p. 15).



Otro ejemplo son los llamados “continentes de basura” que se encuentran en todos los océanos, se forman por las corrientes marinas y condensan todo tipo de residuos. Existen numerosas campañas de sensibilización respecto a la basura, especialmente aquellas que promueven el reciclaje y el correcto embalaje y eliminación, que sin duda son importantes. Sin embargo, muchas veces nos dan la falsa impresión de que podemos seguir consumiendo al mismo nivel. De este modo, además de comprender qué nos lleva a desechar objetos, es necesario repensar la actitud de consumo.

El consumo se puede entender mejor si se pone en perspectiva, ya que existen diferencias entre los residuos producidos en los países postindustriales, industriales y agrarios. (Rial, 2016, p. 14). También hay sociedades en las que la modernidad está selectivamente presente, es decir, solo se experimentan algunos aspectos de la modernidad, ya sean más o menos tangibles. Estas diferencias en el consumo influyen en los tipos y el volumen de residuos generados (Rial, 2016, p. 14). Además de las discrepancias entre países, podemos comprobar que la cantidad de generación de residuos per cápita depende mucho de las diferencias entre los espacios del entorno urbano y sus peculiaridades.

El posmodernismo y el posindustrialismo están relacionados. En el paso de la “sociedad tradicional” a la Modernidad, los individuos perdieron las anclas fijas que posicionaban su lugar en la sociedad. Estas anclas podrían consistir, por ejemplo, en relaciones de parentesco, en unidades territoriales (como una aldea) o en clases sociales. En la modernidad, cuando las anclas tradicionales han perdido su fuerza, la posición social de las personas se ha vuelto incierta. Por tanto, la ruptura de estas cadenas resultó tanto en incertidumbre como en libertad. (Rial, 2016, p. 15).

A partir de ese momento, la libertad exigió también la toma de decisiones individuales, y las elecciones de consumo son una de las formas de establecerse en un lugar en la sociedad moderna. En el entorno urbano existen diferencias entre los residuos domésticos producidos en barrios considerados de alto poder adquisitivo y los de bajo poder adquisitivo. La “basura pobre y la basura rica” se la disputan los recolectores y las unidades seleccionadoras. Son recuerdos de desigualdades.

Marques enumera tres factores de un posible colapso medioambiental del capitalismo y la cuestión de los residuos. El primero es la obsolescencia programada. El segundo es la *neofilia*, consumismo compulsivo estimulado por deseos que, al hacerse realidad, aparecen y necesitan nuevas “experiencias” de compra. Estos deseos, estimulados y realizados inmediatamente, van acompañados del tercer factor, que es la aparición del crédito al consumo. Gran parte de los residuos producidos proceden de residuos preconsumo, es decir, aquellos residuos del embalaje, de la ornamentación asociada a la exhibición de la marca en una especie de fetiche. De esta manera, el fetiche de las mercancías ya no está en la esfera de la producción, sino en la esfera del consumo. Actualmente, ejercer la ciudadanía es sinónimo de formar parte del mercado de consumo y tener acceso a bienes de consumo, lo que presupone tener acceso al crédito (Marques, 2015).

Los residuos son también una huella de los índices y características del consumo global, su circulación no es solo en la cadena de producción, consumo y eliminación, sino en las iniciativas de exportación e importación de residuos. Existe un mercado ilegal a nivel mundial en el que se depositan residuos reciclables o no, generalmente muy peligrosos, en los países en desarrollo. Existe una red de incentivos financieros para que los países desarrollados transfieran sus empresas más contaminantes a los países en desarrollo (Marques, 2015).

Por lo tanto, estudiar desde la ciencia antropológica de manera interdisciplinaria la basura, el reciclaje de residuos, elementos que son parte del consumo de mercancías, es un medio eficaz de indagar en cuestiones fundamentales de lo que es el ser humano dentro de la diversidad de la cultura, y contribuye a darle un nuevo potencial a la disciplina.

La basura es un concepto que adquiere multidimensiones, presenta una compleja red de relaciones que conecta a su vez heterogéneos detritus del consumo con los insumos que demandan las grandes empresas que los reciclan. Agreguemos, como indica Drackner (2005), que desde la disciplina antropológica lo que constituye

desperdicio (basura/desecho) es una noción puramente subjetiva, ya que puede admitir ser visto como riesgo para la salud, ser antiestético, como contagio social, o ser de beneficio económico como fuente de ingresos. Esas percepciones pueden incidir en los sistemas de gestión de los residuos. Por cuanto un tema que es el centro de todas las ciudades del mundo, la gestión de sus residuos, si antes les competía a las administraciones y a las empresas, ahora se ha convertido en un tema de todos porque se le ha transferido su responsabilidad a la ciudadanía: clasificar, recuperar, reciclar. Esta atención dada a los residuos y su destino ha puesto de relieve a actores menos visibles que juegan un papel importante en su valorización, los clasificadores, quienes con su actividad de recuperación liberan a la ciudad de sus residuos.

Entre la marginación y el reconocimiento, entre la exclusión y la integración, los recicladores son los primeros eslabones de los sistemas cambiantes de gestión ambiental de las ciudades. Esos residuos se convierten en recursos, volviéndose lucrativos, afectando la valoración de ellos, interviniendo leyes que dirimen las actividades de recuperación. Y ello está relacionado con el consumo de las sociedades denominadas modernas, los volúmenes y los tipos de residuos que son producidos.

Bauman (2005) conceptualizó el término *modernidad líquida* para dar la definición de una sociedad basada en el modo de producción y el consumo, donde los valores y percepciones mutan constantemente. Una sociedad que rinde culto al consumo por el consumo y a la eliminación de desechos. Así la economía se mantiene en funcionamiento. La industria de eliminación de residuos, dice Bauman, es quizá la única en la que nunca va a faltar el trabajo, y el trabajo del recolector, que se lleva los desechos modernos de cada día, se hace simplemente invisible no mirándolo e impensable no pensando en ello. El residuo es, a la vez, el problema más angustioso y el secreto mejor guardado de nuestros tiempos.

La gran mayoría de los productos que consumimos ahora y poseemos se idearon ajenos a la economía circular. Por eso, se plantea que nuestra actitud es doble: reciclar lo que ya está en el mercado y rediseñar el futuro. El reciclaje cumple con dos funciones importantes para lo social y ambiental, ya que reduce el volumen de residuos que van a los vertederos o rellenos sanitarios y genera valor a través de lo monetario a través de la venta de lo recuperado (reciclable) a las industrias transformadoras. El reciclaje permite devolver al círculo de consumo materiales que fueron usados de forma primaria. Evita extraer recursos de la naturaleza que son finitos y abarata los nuevos productos generados en el proceso.

## **El plástico, multifacético**

En las últimas décadas, el uso del plástico en la economía global ha aumentado considerablemente y ello se debe en gran medida a sus propias cualidades. Los encontramos en los envases, en la ropa, en los edificios, en los coches, en los aviones, en los teléfonos móviles, en la agricultura o en los dispositivos médicos, entre otras muchas aplicaciones. Los plásticos son materiales obtenidos artificialmente mediante una gran transformación química de sustancias de origen orgánico, es decir, son materiales sintéticos que no se encuentran de forma natural. Su principal característica es la plasticidad, son fáciles de fabricar y de dar forma. Para facilitar la identificación de cada polímero y también para ayudar a su clasificación (por ejemplo, para el reciclado mecánico), se ha instituido el Código Internacional SPI, que permite identificar con facilidad de qué material específicamente está hecho un objeto de plástico. Se han clasificado los principales polímeros de la siguiente manera:

Figura 1. Clasificación de polímeros



Fuente: <https://ctplas.com.uy/>

Pero, a pesar de sus beneficios en el uso, la dificultad que presentan es su eliminación o reciclado. La forma en que los plásticos se producen, utilizan y desechan no permite el beneficio de sustentabilidad de una economía circular y perjudica al medioambiente. La disposición final del plástico acumulado desde hace más de un siglo y la incapacidad a nivel mundial de gestionarlo correctamente ha generado un problema dramático en lo ambiental y en lo social. Si bien los plásticos brindan muchos beneficios, sus cadenas de valor, aún lineales, conllevan importantes inconvenientes económicos y ambientales (Pittaluga y Pirroco, 2021).

Tal como mencionan Boucher y Billard (2019), *plástico* es una sola palabra para una realidad multifacética, ya que abarca una variedad de polímeros y aditivos con diferentes propiedades químicas y físicas. Los productos finales van desde bolsas de plástico de un solo uso, envolturas de alimentos, botellas de plástico, calzados, recipientes diversos hasta fibras sintéticas utilizadas en la industria de la confección y la pesca. Pero, así como el uso de plástico es generalizado, también lo es la contaminación plástica. Se estima que diez millones de toneladas de plástico se filtran al océano cada año, lo que provoca una crisis ambiental sin precedentes. Y ahí tenemos en nuestros mares, ríos y océanos tanto macroplásticos como microplásticos.

La contaminación plástica se distribuye globalmente en todos los océanos debido a sus propiedades de flotabilidad y durabilidad y a la absorción de sustancias tóxicas en el plástico mientras viaja por el medioambiente (Eriksen et al., 2014). Mientras que, en las ciudades, el hecho de que este material no sea biodegradable hace que su disposición mediante el enterramiento genere un pasivo ambiental muy importante, ya que el plazo necesario para su degradación es muy alto. Se calcula que el plástico tarda entre cien y mil años en descomponerse, por lo que está considerado como un material de descomposición muy lento y a largo plazo. Una botella de plástico tarda hasta quinientos años en desintegrarse, aunque si está enterrada este tiempo se prolonga aún más (Cempre, 1998).

## El reciclaje del plástico en Uruguay

El punto de partida es determinar cómo ingresan los plásticos al mercado en Uruguay. Para ello entrevisté a Jorge, integrante del Centro Uruguay Independiente (CUI). El CUI es una asociación civil que desde 1995 trabaja con proyectos ambientales. En el año 2007 inicia un trabajo de dignificación y formalización de clasificadores de residuos. Jorge es uno de los fundadores, y expresa al respecto: “Los plásticos al país entran de productos importados donde se convierten en productos y envases plásticos para el mercado interno y la exportación”. También, continúa, a través de productos importados con plásticos incorporados en diferentes proporciones: en vestimenta, calzado, electrónicos, materiales de construcción, muebles, automotores, autopartes. Además, formando parte de embalajes y empaques que vienen de productos importados, “y ahí tenés distintos tipos de embalajes con diferentes resinas, polietileno de baja densidad, poliestireno, polietileno” (Jorge). Esos productos plásticos que ingresan de esa forma van a la industria, a los comercios, ya sea para el consumo interno o para la exportación. Como expresan Baráibar y Andrada (2018), los destinos finales de todo ese plástico ingresado serán el relleno sanitario, los vertederos, los basurales, los ecosistemas, y una pequeña parte será para la recuperación y el reciclaje.

Según indican Pittaluga y Pirrocco (2021), tomando cálculos recientes, el 79 % de los residuos plásticos que se han producido hasta el año 2015 yace actualmente en vertederos, basureros o en el medioambiente, principalmente en los océanos, mientras que aproximadamente el 12 % ha sido incinerado y solo el 9 % ha sido reciclado.

Jorge dice que “el plástico como residuo es todo un tema en sí mismo, porque hay diferentes tipos y eso complica al reciclar”. El hecho de que exista gran diversidad de resinas plásticas vuelve más complicado el reciclaje de plásticos, ya que se necesita una correcta clasificación para su posterior reciclaje. Por lo tanto, la etapa previa de identificación y clasificación se vuelve fundamental, pero no siempre es sencillo reconocer los distintos tipos si estos no están correctamente identificados con su simbología. Reciclar plásticos estando estos mezclados lleva a la obtención de materiales de menor calidad y resistencia.

En este punto, al visitar ATMA, una empresa transformadora de plásticos ubicada en la ciudad de La Paz, Leticia (jefa de calidad) cuenta lo siguiente:

No todo es sencillo, el proceso de reciclaje enfrenta ciertos desafíos que es lo que se relaciona con la diferencia molecular de los distintos tipos de plásticos, ya que ellos no se pueden mezclar entre sí. La razón de ello es que tienden a separarse. Entonces es necesario reciclar cada tipo de plástico por separado para que puedan mezclarse con éxito. Para obtener buenos productos hay que recuperar y reciclar por resinas. (Leticia)

Continuando con el reciclaje de plásticos en el país, Jorge explica que el tema más complicado es el económico, por los oligopolios existentes.

Hay un monopolio para el PET, casi un oligopolio. Y después existen empresas chicas que colocan en el mercado local, varias de ellas funcionan con irregularidades de todo tipo, trabajo informal, robo de energía eléctrica, etcétera. El reciclaje a nadie le ha importado mucho, no es negocio, sino para los que están en la cúpula, en los oligopolios. (Jorge)

Para el caso de la recuperación de envases para reciclar, hay una mayoría de ellos que no tienen valor de mercado (envases de paquetes de fideos, de galletitas, y otros envases plásticos), esos posiblemente terminen en los vertederos y rellenos. En el caso de las botellas de refrescos, tienen un valor bajo, no se pueden recuperar desde la base porque no tienen un valor de retorno y al no haber un precio de retorno (por ejemplo, que el consumidor lleve el envase para ser reciclado) el consumidor no lo lleva. “Solo vuelve el retornable. Ahí siempre vuelve” (Jorge). El tema pasa en que no se quiere aceptar que todos los envases sean retornables. Y en esto Jorge enfatiza: “En el caso del reciclaje, siempre lo económico se lleva puesto lo social y lo ambiental”. Para el PET, hay una empresa que lleva más de dos décadas en el negocio, que necesitan la materia prima debido a que se cerró el mercado de China (ellos exportaban escamas de plástico sucias). Ahora necesitan materia prima lavada para utilizarla como materia prima barata local. El asunto es que hay que recoger los envases, sigue explicando Jorge, y en sí “no les interesa recoger en cantidad, el negocio es que quieren materia prima barata para llegar a producir lo que ellos necesitan, y ya está”.

En los plásticos, el monopolio lo tiene la empresa que interviene con la resina PET, que termina comprando todo a partir de intermediarios. Para el resto de plásticos son muchos los compradores y las empresas recicladoras. En materia de economía, circular con respecto al plástico Jorge da su explicación: “En materia de envases claro que no se alinean, saben que es imposible juntar millones de envases que diariamente van al mercado, su gran negocio es el envase de un solo uso”. Y reafirma que, si en serio se quiere la economía circular, los envases, al menos los de mayor tamaño, deberían ser retornables.

Un factor a tener en cuenta es el precio que se paga por los plásticos a reciclar, que varía según el precio del petróleo, por lo tanto, se trata de un mercado fuertemente variable, lo que puede afectar la sustentabilidad del negocio.

A pesar de que la legislación adjudica a las empresas la responsabilidad de los plásticos que pone en el mercado, según CTplas, en 2017 se colocaron 14000 toneladas de envases de bebidas y casi 1 millón de envases de bebidas termina en los vertederos o en el medioambiente. Cuando en 2019 se aprobó la nueva Ley General de Gestión Integral de Residuos, con ella se quiso minimizar la generación de residuos tanto plásticos como otros, fomentando la reutilización y recuperación a través del reciclado. A su vez se introdujo un impuesto ambiental para financiar programas especiales de gestión de residuos. Pero el lobby empresarial de las industrias del plástico influyó en varios artículos permitiendo que las empresas sigan utilizando plásticos de un solo uso y eximiéndolas de cualquier responsabilidad. La AUIP (Asociación Industrias del Plástico) culpa al consumidor y desvía su responsabilidad como productora de envases plásticos. Una táctica de la industria que transfiere su responsabilidad a otros, mientras continúa produciendo empaques y botellas que no serán reciclados al final de su ciclo de vida. “El lobby cada vez es más”, dice Jorge, “dicen tener soluciones para el plástico, hablan del potencial del reciclaje, pero el tema es el costo, el gran problema es juntarlo y que esté limpio, y no quieren arriesgarse a perder, mienten con las cifras que recuperan”.

### **Actores de la cadena de reciclado de plástico**

La investigación etnográfica se realizó principalmente a partir de la observación en las calles y barrios, y posteriormente se pudo ampliar a la ciudad de Las Piedras (Uruguay) con el tema del plástico. Desde el momento en que uno sale de su casa con la bolsa de plástico y se encuentra con un contenedor de basura desbordado, con residuos esparcidos por la calle, puede preguntarse cómo funciona todo el sistema. Esta etapa de los caminos que recorre la basura es la más cercana a nosotros y por tanto la más cuestionada. Partimos de ese punto hasta encontrar a los actores que trabajan y reciclan principalmente residuos plásticos.

El registro se realizó mediante cuaderno de notas en el lugar, y diario de campo con posterioridad. Las conversaciones informales se mantuvieron con los clasificadores mientras realizaban su labor, registrándolas en el lugar o a posteriori. Una gimnasia de la mirada en el espacio delimitado del barrio me permitió, en ese tiempo etnográfico, observar la circulación de estos seres humanos y vincular con otras dimensiones de sus vidas. Mientras que las entrevistas se desarrollaron en un espacio y tiempo determinado y fueron registradas mediante grabador, de acuerdo con protocolos de investigación, algunos de los nombres de los sujetos intervinientes fueron cambiados para preservar su identidad.

Los habitantes se apropian de las esquinas para colocar desechos junto al contenedor, modificando el espacio, a la vez que lo contaminan, al generar prácticas en el mal manejo de los desechos y determinando la formación de microbasurales en torno a ellos.

**Figura 2.** Esquina con basura.



**Figura 3.** Contenedor con residuos alrededor



Fuente: Acervo personal de Sonia Gau Angelo

En la figura 2 vemos una calle pavimentada con las aceras ausentes y en su lugar crece pasto, podemos ver postes cerca de las paredes de los edificios al fondo, parece que la calle está arbolada. Justo al lado de un árbol hay un contenedor azul de basura descolorido, bolsas blancas y negras se desbordan del contenedor y en el suelo algunos residuos más grandes esperan su recogida. En la figura 3, también en una esquina, o frente a ella, vemos calles pavimentadas, sin aceras pero con césped, un invernadero de agua con muros bajos y otras construcciones al fondo. Centrado en la imagen está el contenedor azul, también descolorido. Se observa que está en mal estado de conservación, sin tapa, torcido y casi en plena calle. Este no está desbordado, pero aparentemente todos los residuos están en el suelo, abandonados a la espera del siguiente paso en sus trayectorias. Vemos un sofá rojo dado vuelta, debajo de lo que parece ser el marco de un televisor, bolsas blancas con materiales de gran tamaño y restos de poda de árboles.

Estas fotos son ejemplos de lo que se encuentra al caminar por las calles de la ciudad, y señalan el problema de los residuos. Son, en cierto modo, un punto de cruce entre los diferentes actores, desde la producción hasta el destino final de los residuos.

Estos residuos no están en esos espacios por arte de magia y no desaparecen por arte de magia, hay una serie de políticas públicas que con el tiempo modifican las formas de recolectar dichos residuos. Si nos referimos específicamente a los plásticos, son varios los actores que participan en este trabajo. A continuación, analizaremos los roles de algunos de ellos.

Los clasificadores, también denominados recuperadores urbanos, conforman un colectivo de trabajadores informales que recolectan residuos plásticos del circuito urbano o comercial por cuenta propia mediante carro a caballo, carro con bicicleta o ciclomotor o carro tirado a mano. Luego de recolectar los residuos, los clasifican por tipo de material en sus hogares. Frecuentemente disponen el material sobrante o descarte en márgenes de cursos de agua. Finalmente, el producido de su labor lo venden a depósitos del barrio. También existen grupos de clasificadores formalizados en proyectos complementarios de clasificación de envases primarios posconsumo

y comerciales (con circuitos limpios, puerta a puerta y puntos de entrega voluntaria), que realizan su tarea en una planta de valorización para complementar el circuito comercial. Se estima que los clasificadores alcanzan unos cinco mil en el Uruguay (Baráibar y Andrada, 2017).

Al respecto, Jorge cuenta:

La organización de los clasificadores fue a partir de la ley de envases (2004) y en el año 2007 se hicieron cooperativas. Nosotros seguimos acompañando tres grupos de clasificadores, dos en Las Piedras y uno en Barros Blancos, los tres en Canelones. Primero les hicimos capacitación, pero fue todo un tema porque se empezaron a negar, además algunos actores que iban a estar en la coordinación, por ejemplo, el Mides [Ministerio de Desarrollo] y el Ministerio de Vivienda, se fueron, solo quedamos nosotros, la Intendencia de Canelones y la Cámara de Industrias, que es la que pone, como establece la ley, el dinero, y es el actor más fuerte junto a la Intendencia y ahora se agregó el Ministerio de Ambiente. En esto hay intereses, que no se capaciten, que no crezcan, que se dediquen a clasificar, es un gran tema este.

Por mi casa pasa a veces Julio, él antes recogía papel y cartón y plásticos para venderlos en el depósito del barrio, los recogía de los contenedores públicos de la zona. Ahora, al cambiar el sistema de recogida de residuos por contenedores domiciliarios, se ha quedado reducido su recolección a algunos vecinos que le juntan y cuando pasa se lo alcanzan. Antes tiraba de su carrito de forma manual, ahora le agregó una bicicleta “y es mejor”, dice,

Por suerte me salió una jubilación, porque antes yo trabajaba en quintas, recogiendo frutas, y también estuve en un cuartel cuando era joven, en Lavalleja. Lo que saco con esto que vendo me ayuda también, aunque pagan poco. Por el papel y cartón pagan muy poquito, y tengo que juntar mucho para tener ganancia, por el plástico, un poco más. Todo es sacrificado para nosotros los que juntamos, pero tengo orgullo de ser lo que soy, por algo la gente me junta y me da, y yo lo vendo. (Julio)

Nunca pudo acceder a ser formalizado, por más que dice que lo registraron en el censo de clasificadores, capaz que “porque ya tenía edad” y necesitaban a personas más jóvenes, saca en deducción “pero ahora con esto y lo que saco de jubilación nos revolvemos con la patrona, ella trabaja en casa de familia”, y tiene dos nietas chicas que crían él y su esposa.

Los clasificadores constituyen el eslabón fundamental para el reciclaje de plástico en el Uruguay, pues ellos son los que se dedican a recolectar los residuos descartados por los vecinos. De hecho, es alta la cantidad de envases que descarta diariamente la población, sobre todo al aparecer la modalidad de envases descartables. Venden los plásticos a los depósitos que luego los exportan (en caso de ser PET) o los venden a las industrias recicladoras. Como Julio, ellos manifiestan orgullo de dedicar su tiempo en la recolecta y clasificación de los materiales reciclables pues, si no lo hacen, esos materiales van a terminar en la tierra, y de esta forma lo pueden devolver al mercado. Es un trabajo digno y tratan de hacerlo no solo por su valor económico, sino por el valor ambiental que aportan.

Para el caso de clasificadores organizados en una cooperativa, acompañados por CUI, la ONG de la que Jorge forma parte, ya están formalizados, aunque cabe aclarar que el mecanismo para lograr esta situación es burocrático y lento. El tema es que “los clasificadores no son dueños absolutamente de nada” las empresas no quieren comprarles directamente a los empleados, “todo lo tercerizan, especialmente porque no hay una autoridad nacional en el tema de los residuos” (Jorge, CUI).

Los datos que aporta la prensa en Uruguay sobre los plásticos son dignos de tener en cuenta, atendiendo al tema reciclaje y la mirada que el país le da a este tema. Según el semanario *Búsqueda* (2022), actualmente llegan a los sitios de disposición final más de 200 000 toneladas de residuos plásticos cada año. De ellas, 80 000 son envases de los cuales las plantas reciclan un 4%. Esto influye en la precariedad y la inestabilidad de los clasificadores que trabajan en centros de acopio.

En cuanto a la formalización de los clasificadores, pasan los años y muchos no lo han conseguido, en cambio otros no están interesados; el panorama en torno a este tema es complejo. De una población de entre 5000 y 10 000 clasificadores, los formalizados solo alcanzan a trescientos aproximadamente (entre un 3 % y un 6 %).

Continuando con los actores del reciclaje de plástico, encontramos los depósitos de barrio. Por lo general son clasificadores que logran escalar en su actividad, cuentan con un medio de transporte de carga, eventualmente con una prensa, y compran materiales en el barrio y sus alrededores. Son un intermediario entre los clasificadores y los grandes depósitos. Frecuentemente son organizaciones informales que pueden tener cierta especialización por tipo de materiales.

Cerca de mi casa hay un depósito de compra de materiales reciclables que compra, entre otros, plástico. Antonio es el encargado. Dice que no da boleta de compra, porque nadie de los que viene a venderle se la pide. Él paga y todos conforme. Vende en Montevideo a un depósito que viene a retirarle la mercadería y es el que mejor paga. “Vendo al que mejor paga”. Cada material tiene un precio que corresponde a 1 kg de material. El clasificador trae el material, se pesa en la balanza que tiene el negocio y “se paga lo justo”, dice. Como el fin del negocio es el acopio de materiales, él junto con un empleado se encargan de clasificarlos y acondicionarlos en fardos mejor venderlos mejor.

Las empresas que se dedican a recibir, clasificar, enfardar y acondicionar varios tipos de materiales posconsumo o posindustriales son los grandes depósitos. Los proveedores de los depósitos son grandes generadores, comercios, industrias, depósitos de barrio. Son en muchos casos los principales abastecedores de la industria del reciclaje. Estos grandes depósitos ofrecen servicios de compra y venta, tratan los materiales reciclables en sus plantas, para luego enviarlos a empresas nacionales e internacionales. Cuando el país no ofrece la solución necesaria para gestionar esos materiales, esos depósitos se encargan de exportarlos. En general, tratan de incluir en el circuito de reciclado la mayor cantidad de sus residuos. Tal es el caso de los scraps de plástico, el desperdicio o materia prima rechazada del proceso industrial, que posee un valor económico y que estas empresas a su vez gestionan. Así logra abastecer a industrias que los utilizan como materia prima, en cualquier parte del mundo. Rotondaro (papel y cartón) y Pedernal (variados residuos) son los grandes depósitos, ubicados en Montevideo. En el caso de Pedernal, compra y vende variados scraps de plásticos para abastecer a las industrias, ya sea nacionales o extranjeras, que los utilizan como materia prima.

**Figuras 3 y 4.** Scraps de plástico



Fuente: <https://depositopedernal.com.uy/gestion-scraps-de-plastico/>

Los actores de la cadena de reciclaje de plástico que operan en la formalidad son las empresas recicladoras. En Uruguay son alrededor de 23 empresas que procesan una diversidad de materiales plásticos, principalmente PEBD, PEAD y PET. Para ver interiorizarme sobre el reciclaje de plásticos en empresas generadoras concurre a ATMA, una empresa que queda en las cercanías de mi casa, aproximadamente a dos kilómetros.

Esta empresa esta empresa opera en Uruguay desde 1948, y desde 1982 su planta industrial está ubicada en la ciudad de La Paz, próxima a Las Piedras. Allí me puse en contacto con Leticia (jefa de calidad), quien accedió a darme información sobre cómo ATMA ha enfocado el tema del reciclaje. En sus inicios, una frase de



publicidad de la empresa resumía el papel del plástico: “El plástico no solo es materia, también es espíritu”. En sus comienzos, la fábrica se orientaba especialmente a cajones y productos del hogar; en la actualidad hay una hibridación enfocada a productos y desarrollo de diseños.

**Figura 5.** Vieja publicidad de ATMA



Fuente: [www.atma.com.uy](http://www.atma.com.uy)

Leticia cuenta que la empresa viene apostando fuertemente al tema del reciclaje. Tal es así que en el 2020, en conjunto con Fábricas Nacionales de Cerveza (FNC), desarrollaron una nueva línea de trabajo. “Ese proyecto con Fábricas Nacionales de Cerveza surge como parte de brindar una solución al cliente, de qué hacía con los cajones rotos o que están en desuso; es así que los trae y los incorpora al proceso y vuelven a ser reciclados y reincorporados al mercado” (Leticia). Ambas empresas hace años que trabajan juntas y este proyecto permitió darle impulso a la industria del plástico en el tema reciclado.

Leticia cuenta que los técnicos de la empresa trabajaron en el desarrollo del molde y el diseño de las piezas, que debían de ser compatibles con la estructura del casillero de FNC y además tenía que ser sustentable. “Tanto es así que, para que llegara a ser ciento por ciento reciclado, se tuvo que rever el molde y la máquina que fabrica el casillero”. El proceso de diseño llevó tiempo, casi un año, entre desarrollar la matriz y probar si funcionaba, “además se hicieron distintas pruebas de materiales para ver a qué porcentaje de material reciclado se podía llegar”. Después de varias pruebas, se llegó a validar un producto 100% reciclado reusando casilleros rotos que se iban a destruir. Además, cuando esos casilleros se vuelvan a romper, vuelven otra vez al ciclo de reciclado. Así, este proyecto evita usar plástico virgen al sustituirlo por plástico reciclado. Se realizaron cerca de 50 000 casilleros reciclados, usando unos 52 500 originales.

**Figura 6.** Casilleros usados para reciclar



Fuente: [www.atma.com.uy](http://www.atma.com.uy)

Figura 7. Casillero reciclado



Fuente: [www.atma.com.uy](http://www.atma.com.uy)

A los efectos de saber qué otros productos son elaborados mediante el reciclado, Leticia explica: “Hoy la mayoría de los cajones se están haciendo reciclados y hay también una línea de baldes de pintura con material reciclado incorporado, pero se está intentando incrementar los productos con este proceso”. Pero hace una aclaración, no se pueden incorporar al proceso con material reciclado los envases para alimentos, porque no se puede asegurar la limpieza del producto. Existen normas que impiden incorporar material reciclado posconsumo en envases que van a estar en contacto con alimentos. “ATMA lo que hace es reciclado de productos para varias industrias que no tienen contacto directo con alimentos”. En cuanto a los polímeros que utiliza la fábrica para elaborar, “todo lo que tiene que ver con cajones y casilleros es polietileno de alta densidad y los baldes de pintura son de polipropileno. La empresa no fabrica nada en PET”.

Acerca de cómo llegan a obtener la materia prima para el reciclado, Leticia explica que la mayoría es traída por los clientes. En cuanto al tema costo, el artículo reciclado es más barato. Al cliente se le compra la materia prima, la cual se muele, se lava y luego se seca para posteriormente incorporarla al proceso. Leticia manifiesta que “los clientes están exigiendo, y es la línea que hay que seguir, el reciclado de plástico, hay que empezar a tomar conciencia de que el plástico se puede reutilizar, reciclar”. Y termina agregando que “en realidad no es el plástico el malo, sino las malas prácticas del ser humano, en realidad el material se puede volver a reciclar muchas veces”.

La empresa se ha volcado fuertemente a la sustentabilidad del plástico mediante el reciclado. Entre las estrategias que implementa, no solo apunta a la economía circular, sino que también participa en campañas de reciclaje con los clientes y los socios estratégicos con los cuales trabaja.

Otros de los actores implicados en el reciclaje de plásticos son los comercios. A través de empaques y embalajes de productos, el plástico que generan termina en acopiadores, en depósitos, en clasificadores formalizados o informales y en las industrias transformadoras. Para saber sobre ello, concurrí al supermercado donde hago las compras. Allí Silvana, la hija del dueño, me cuenta:

Sí, se saca mucho nylon de las fundas, de cajas, de mercaderías, entonces claro, se arma un bulto importante y tenés que tener un espacio físico para eso, dedicado a eso, durante todo el día se junta. Viene un señor a levantarla, un vecino, si no viniera, tendríamos que tener..., no sé, varios contenedores para todo lo que sacamos en el día.

Un día que salía del supermercado, vi al vecino acomodando en una camioneta los cartones y nylon que estaban en el contenedor y otro montón desperdigados en el suelo. Le pregunté dónde los comercializaba y me respondió “donde me paguen más”, y siguió con su tarea de guardarlos.



En Montevideo, el programa Montevideo Más Verde y el proyecto Ecocentro Itinerante consisten en una red de centros de recepción de residuos, mediante un módulo de recepción de materiales reciclables, que se instala una semana en cada barrio de Montevideo. Se pueden depositar plásticos PET, botellas de refrescos, agua, yogurt, limpiadores, y plásticos PEAD, envases de shampoo, hipoclorito, bidones.

**Figura 10.** Ecocentro Itinerante



Fuente: Acervo personal Sonia Gau Angelo

En materia de envases de productos agrícolas (agroquímicos y fertilizantes), el programa Campo Limpio involucra a los actores de la cadena productiva agropecuaria, hortifrutícola y forestal (importadores, fabricantes, distribuidores, aplicadores y agricultores). Se relaciona con una iniciativa voluntaria para la recolección, acondicionamiento y valorización de envases de productos fitosanitarios. Para ello se implementaron galpones para recibir envases vacíos perforados y con triple lavado, implementados en centros de acopio en trece departamentos del país.

**Figura 11.** Centro de acopio en Salto



Fuente: <https://campolimpio.org.uy>

Cuando visité la empresa ATMA, Leticia me había comentado sobre este programa. En el pasado se llevaban los envases para ser reciclados, exigiendo que fueran bien lavados (triple lavado).

En un momento en que estuvimos participando del círculo de reciclado de bidones para productos agroquímicos, de triple lavado de envases de agroquímicos, asegurándonos que no quedarán restos de productos tóxicos, entregábamos envases para vender. Pero qué nos pasaba, que no funcionaba bien ese triple lavado. Para nosotros significaba un riesgo para el operario que estaba trabajando ahí. Si nos aseguran que están bien lavados, sí, los recibimos. El programa se llama Campo limpio, el mismo productor rural realizaba el lavado, la empresa lo recogía y lo traía a la planta. Ese programa sigue existiendo. Nos decían que con ese triple lavado, si lo hacían correctamente, estaba bien.

## Conclusiones

Es necesario repensar y mejorar el funcionamiento de una cadena de valor tan compleja como es la de los plásticos. Para implementarlo a escala país se necesitan esfuerzos y una mayor cooperación de todos los grupos, desde los productores de plástico, las empresas de reciclado, los consumidores y otros eslabones de la cadena. Resulta imprescindible el esfuerzo continuo por aumentar el porcentaje de plásticos reciclados y reutilizables, así como la reducción del contenido en plástico por unidad de envase, para favorecer el cuidado del medioambiente.

En Uruguay falta camino por recorrer en esa dirección. Un poco tiene que ver con una falta de incentivos y normativa efectiva, que promueva el uso de materia prima reciclada para la elaboración de productos. Tampoco existe una reglamentación clara para la responsabilidad extendida del productor. Por otro lado, faltan campañas de concientización dirigidas al consumidor. Se debe promover la tendencia hacia una economía circular de los plásticos, que implica un modelo de sistema cerrado que promueve la reutilización de productos plásticos, genera valor a partir de los residuos y evita el envío de plásticos recuperables a los vertederos. Ya que un mundo sin plásticos no es posible, la clave está en el consumo responsable y la toma de conciencia de que debemos gestionar correctamente los residuos plásticos para que no supongan un impacto en el medioambiente, como sucede en los océanos y hasta en el continente antártico, donde han sido encontrados pellets de plásticos. Además, debemos anteponer lo ambiental y lo social a lo económico, porque no todo lo podemos dejar libre a esa esfera donde la ganancia va en detrimento de lo otro.

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# To the rescue!

## An ethnography of food waste reduction practices in the Netherlands

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### **Abstract**

Food waste is a challenge to the sustainability of global food systems and to the environment and demonstrates a dire need for solutions in which the food produced for human consumption actually feeds people. Food rescue practices respond to this challenge through the redistribution of food waste materials, working towards a circular economic system. Through analysis of two food rescue organisations, this article maps the food waste network and the actors engaged in practices of transforming discarded food waste materials back into an edible food resource. Despite their best intentions to uphold the fundamental goal of saving food, 'food heroes' face logistical, financial, and ethical hurdles as they implement their food rescue practices. Operating within the globalised food system, which prioritises profit and productivity, is a major challenge to food rescue organisations. This article demonstrates the fragile intricacies of the food waste network and compares how food rescue operates within different levels of the food supply chain.

**Key words:** Food waste; food rescuing; Actor Network Theory; food supply chain; circular economy, discard studies.



# Ao resgate!

## Uma etnografia das práticas de redução do desperdício alimentar na Holanda

### Resumo

O desperdício de alimentos constitui um desafio para a sustentabilidade dos sistemas alimentares globais e para o meio ambiente, evidenciando a necessidade de soluções em que os alimentos produzidos para consumo humano alimentem realmente as pessoas. As práticas de resgate de alimentos respondem a este desafio através da redistribuição de resíduos alimentares, trabalhando no sentido de um sistema económico circular. Através da análise de duas organizações de salvamento de alimentos, este artigo mapeia a rede de desperdício alimentar e os intervenientes envolvidos em práticas de transformação de resíduos alimentares descartados novamente num recurso alimentar comestível. Apesar das suas melhores intenções de defender o objectivo fundamental de poupar alimentos, os “heróis da comida” enfrentam obstáculos logísticos, financeiros e éticos à medida que implementam as suas práticas de resgate de alimentos. Operar dentro do sistema alimentar globalizado, que prioriza o lucro e a produtividade, é um grande desafio para as organizações de resgate de alimentos. Este artigo demonstra as frágeis complexidades da rede de desperdício alimentar e compara como o resgate de alimentos funciona nos diferentes níveis da cadeia de abastecimento alimentar.

**Palavras-chave:** Desperdício de comida; resgate de alimentos; Teoria Ator-Rede; cadeia de abastecimento alimentar; economia circular, descartar estudos.

# To the rescue!

## An ethnography of food waste reduction practices in the Netherlands

*Lena Muldoon*

### **Introduction**

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, one third of all food produced globally is lost or wasted (Gustavsson et al., 2011). Food waste is an environmental, economic, and ethical problem, and exemplifies systemic issues within the global industrialised food system (Turner, 2018). Scholars have identified the major causes of food waste, and within industrial agriculture practices, these causes include aesthetic and quality standards, manufacturing practices, poor environmental conditions, lack of planning with a limited focus on waste, best before dates, and overproduction (Gustavsson et al., 2011). The staggering amounts of food lost or wasted along the food supply chain, approximately ten million tons daily, indicate that the destructive consequences of agricultural production including resource depletion, greenhouse gas emissions, and pollution, are wasted when one third of that food is not consumed by humans as intended (Gustavsson et al., 2011).

Food waste directly contributes to the current climate crisis and environmental degradation in two major ways. First, the practice of producing food has its own environmental impacts, depleting resources such as water, land, and energy, as well as contributing to biodiversity loss, carbon dioxide emissions, and pollution. Global agricultural practices account for 26% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, 70% of freshwater withdrawals, and 32% of acidification (Poore & Nemecek, 2018). When one-third of food is wasted or lost, these massive environmental impacts are also wasted. In addition, wasting one third of food wastes the energy used for growing, packaging, transporting, and cooling that food, which have additional environmental costs (Poore & Nemecek, 2018). The second connection of food waste to the human-induced climate crisis is the greenhouse gas and pollution produced by food waste itself. Landfill emissions amount to one of the largest anthropogenic sources of greenhouse gases including methane and carbon dioxide, largely caused by the anaerobic breakdown of food which has been thrown away (Adhikari et al., 2006).

In response to the environmental and economic effects demonstrated by food waste, food waste reduction has been identified as a global goal by international institutions, national governments, and local organisations. At the international level, the United Nations have pledged to reduce food waste as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) introduced in 2015 (EC, 2021). SDG 12.3 states the objective to “halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses” (UN EP, 2021). In alignment with the United Nation SDGs, the European Union Platform on Food Waste and Food Losses was established in 2016 to bring together EU institutions, experts, and stakeholders in order to define the measures to prevent food waste, share best practices in reducing food waste, and evaluate progress in accomplishing the SDG goals (EC, 2021). The Netherlands, as a member state of the United Nations and European Union, works to uphold these overarching global goals to combat food waste, but as of 2022 there are no legislative policies or requirements for food waste reduction in the Netherlands (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2016).

While these top down policies address food waste reduction at the international and national levels, food waste is, in the end, dependent upon the action and inaction of human actors and their conceptualisations of food and waste. Top-down strategies to reduce food waste at the government and industry level are accompanied by grassroots organisations which work at the local level to reduce food waste through collection and redistribution. My research concerns the practices of reducing food waste, which consists of people working through various initiatives to collect and redistribute food waste. The activity of collecting and redistributing food waste will be hereby addressed as “food rescuing”, as this definition signifies the idea that food waste has been saved. These practices contribute to a circular economic model by reclassifying food waste as a resource and redirecting the materials back into the food supply system (Arisi, 2020).

Many initiatives exist within the Netherlands that aim to reduce food waste through creative strategies and varied practices (Marin, 2021). Too Good To Go, an application started in Denmark and utilised in cities throughout Europe and the UK, enables users to order food which has not been sold from restaurants, cafes, grocery stores, and hotels at a discounted price. Olio, another application, connects community members with their neighbors to share unwanted or unused food. The Waste Transformers is a group operated out of Westerpark in Amsterdam that converts organic waste from kitchens and other companies into biogas which can be used for fuel and heating. Buurtbuik rescues wasted food and seeks to combat poverty and loneliness through their community meals, prepared and eaten family-style. Many food rescue initiatives also uphold Sustainable Development Goal 2, ending world hunger, as the redistributed food is directed to poor and underprivileged communities and food banks. All of these programs contribute to the circular economic model by reconceptualising food waste as a resource which can be recycled for consumption.

Food waste rescue remains a bit of a band-aid solution, as these practices aim to tackle the material results of food waste, rather than *preventing* food waste at the start (Messner et al., 2020; Turner, 2018). Food waste reduction efforts highlight a dysfunctional food chain, which really will only be solved through systematic change enforced through improved food chain governance (Messner et al., 2020). Food waste rescue runs the risk of becoming a green-washed expression of corporate social responsibility, in which food industry powers promote this idea that food waste streams are redirected to food banks and other food saving initiatives rather than making significant changes to industrial food production and distribution, which would more effectively tackle the problem of food waste at its source (Messner et al., 2020; Devin & Richards, 2018). That being said, food waste rescue enhances the sustainability of current food consumption. The current globalised food chain produces constant waste, and the response to redistribute edible materials is both important and effective in reshaping the conceptions of waste and food. This led to the ultimate formulation of my research question: How do food rescue organisations respond to the problem of food waste within the globalised food system?

Food waste is generated at each level of the food supply chain; producers, distributors, retailers, and consumers. I chose just two of the many organisations, pseudonymously referred to as Tomaat and Aardbei, that work to rescue food waste in the Netherlands. Together they cover two phases of the food supply chain towards the consumers’ end of the chain. I chose these field sites because in my initial request to study their practices, they each provided opportunities to become directly involved with their operations. Aardbei and Tomaat also exemplified food rescue practices with very different approaches, and as I conducted fieldwork at both locations each week, I could compare my research findings simultaneously, leading to deeper questions and a richer collection of ethnographic data. Tomaat is a company that works to reduce food waste at the distribution level, connecting large quantities of rescued food with actors in the food industry. Tomaat connects producers, distributors, and retailers through collecting and reselling or donating food waste materials. Aardbei collects food waste from the retailer level and redistributes the food waste materials to restaurant patrons, redirecting the food waste straight to consumers. Aardbei works at the grassroots, local level to redistribute food waste

from retailers, and processes the collected food into community dinner events. My two dissimilar field sites allowed me to draw a map of the food waste network, as food waste materials were redirected away from the trash bins and into the bellies of consumers.

## **Methodology**

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork over the course of Spring 2022. I involved myself at Tomaat as a researcher and later as an employee, and spent most of my time with the operations team in the food rescue centre for approximately 170 hours over the three months. During this time I was fully involved with the operations of the food waste warehouse, which cultivated a deep understanding of how the food supply chain produces and treats food waste, and how Tomaat plays a role in transforming and redistributing these products as an edible material resource. My collected qualitative data includes how food products are processed, the personal insights of my correspondents and their ideas about the food rescue process, how the company negotiates external economic pressures, how logistical and operational problems were resolved, and ultimately how Tomaat operates as a player in the food supply chain.

I also conducted participant observation as a volunteer at Aardbei each week, and altogether spent approximately 30 hours participating in the various food rescue volunteer shifts and spending time with the volunteers and guests of the “Wasteless Dinners”. My data includes describing the interactions with shop owners while collecting the food, the practices involved with selecting, sorting, processing, and creating meals from the collected food, and the gathered personal anecdotes of patrons and volunteers involved with the efforts of Aardbei.

During my fieldwork, I also took over 600 photos, most of which depict food in varying stages of edibility and other related objects and materials such as storage containers, which are integral to the study of food waste and demonstrate the sensory quality of my data. Additionally, I collected data in the form of published books, physical signs, communication materials, social media campaigns, and website promotions which have been produced by both Tomaat and Aardbei.

I have anonymised my field sites and interlocutors to protect the confidentiality of my informants at both food waste rescue organisations and to accommodate an accurate and truthful study of food waste reduction practices as best I can. I was surprised to discover dissonance between the fundamental goals of reducing food waste and promoting sustainable food consumption and the reality of practices exercised by actors in the food waste network. While I had set out to research how food waste operations advance the fight against food waste, I encountered an ethical dilemma when my findings took a rather negative turn. I decided that anonymisation and not mentioning the specific geographic location of my research enabled me to both observe critically and without bad conscience in my analysis of what works, and what does not work, when individuals and organisations set out to reduce food waste.

I was an active player within this network of food waste as I involved myself with the daily operating procedures at Aardbei and Tomaat. I tore through the imaginary veil of separation between passive “observer” to become a fully integrated “participant,” and my role shifted between an ethnographic researcher, a volunteer, and an employee throughout my fieldwork. As I myself became a food rescuer, my insider perspective provided rich detail to my research, but also deeply complicated my ability to study and write about everything I observed without inserting my emotional concerns for the wellbeing of my fellow volunteers and employees within each organisation. My involvement created considerable ethical dilemmas. I struggled between the moral obligation to give an adequate analysis of the food rescue operations and not doing damage to the organisations that welcomed me with open arms and that I was part of for several months.

## Theorising Food Waste Rescue

Food waste has consistently been studied through the methodological lens of Actor Network Theory, as scholars analyse all actors within the food waste network and argue for the importance of relationality and distributed agency (Alhonnoro & Norrgrann, 2018; Beacham, 2018; Turner 2018; Turner, 2019; Jarosz, 2000). My comparative analysis of food waste reduction practices utilises the analytical tool of actor network theory, and specifically the approach of material semiotics, to understand the relationships between human and non-human actors within this globalised food supply chain.

My primary theoretical lens, Actor Network Theory (ANT), is a way of understanding the social and the natural worlds through the relationships between all actors in a “materially diverse, heterogeneous system” (Law & Singleton, 2014: 382). The material diversity and heterogeneity originate from the different actors involved and their contrasting ways of relating to each other within their networks. This analytic framework has been put forth by Bruno Latour, John Law, and Michael Callon (Law & Singleton, 2014: 380). ANT breaks down the divisions between agency and culture, taking into account how human and non-human actors within a network relate to each other. Law and his fellow ANT theorists argue that networks of actors create an “ontological multiplicity” of realities (Law & Singleton, 2014: 380). The fluidity and shifting nature of the networks between actors create different realities through different practices. In terms of food waste, the realities enacted through material qualities determine if a specific food product is saved or thrown away.

Material semiotics engages with the signs and symbols that create cognitive frames for waste and food but allows for these frames to be changing and fluid. This idea contrasts with other major theories in relation to waste and discard studies, especially the symbolic-structuralist approach. Symbolic structuralism is largely influenced by the anthropologist Mary Douglas, who is attributed to popularising the classification of dirt as “matter out of place”. Douglas argues that “dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, insofar as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements” (Douglas, 1966: 36). Her theory suggests that within a food system, inappropriate food will be rejected; this constitutes the food that is wasted. Douglas argues that “for something to be filthy, polluting, dangerous, it must violate some ideal sense of the way things ought to be” (Douglas, 1966 as cited in Reno, 2014: 2). Within the symbolic-structuralist approach, food waste is socially constructed by the relationships between humans and non-human food. This designation is static and unchanging and suggests that the social structures which define waste are immobile. A major ontological turn within Actor Network Theory is that the many relations within the network create many realities, which opposes the staticity of structuralism.

With this point of view in mind, I contend that in order to understand food waste rescue, one must think about how it is practised in all its material forms. The actors involved with the network of food waste “generate particular material combinations and forms” through their relationships (Law & Singleton, 2014). The practices involved with food waste reduction mobilise human and non-human actors across the food supply chain, from farmers to consumers and everything in between. The phenomena of food waste, and of its reduction, is inherently material, engaging with the movement and ontological conceptualisation of human and non-human actors.

These actors include a whole range of materials including the food itself, cardboard boxes, plastic wrapping, wooden shipping pallets, delivery trucks, delivery drivers, cold storage facilities, food sorters, food buyers, online market platforms, social media posts, volunteer group chats, cargo bicycles, fruit vendors, garbage bins and rubber gloves.

The economic-materialist approach to waste is concerned with waste and value and the flow of waste on a global scale. Scholars of this theoretical school focus on the materiality of waste and the political and economic structures that shape how and where waste appears (O’Hare, 2019). Reno (2014) writes that materials deemed worthless and rejected cannot be completely social and cultural but must on some level possess a

significant material character (Reno, 2014). Waste is also material after it has been rejected, and this materiality is significant when thinking about alternative food systems which incorporate redistributed food waste. Semiotics and classifications of waste are integral to deciding what is edible and considered food, and food redistribution organisations are actively generating new conceptualisations regarding food. Reno examines the semi-biotic nature of waste, which refers to the idea that life requires signs to engage with the world (Reno, 2014).

The materiality of waste is also explored by Australian anthropologist Bethaney Turner, who argues that engaging in alternative food practices present possibilities of “decentering human subjects and supporting more sustainable subjects” (Turner, 2018: 200). De-centering humans from the discourse of waste aligns with the post-human and intersubjective approach to waste described by O’Hare (O’Hare, 2019).

### **Tomaat: Rescue practices at a distributor**

This section and the next one delves into the practices of food rescuers, and paints a picture of the actors, physical layout, and daily operating procedures at Tomaat and Aardbei. Through my analysis, I demonstrate how daily operations at both organisations are designed to uphold the overall goals of reducing food waste. This section discusses the operations of both food rescue organisations and important processes involved with the transformation of food waste from a discarded material to an edible resource.

Tomaat is a company that works at the distribution level to reduce food waste as a wholesaler of rescued food. Tomaat tackles the problem of food waste through its warehouse and online market, food waste-based products, and educational materials. The food waste rescue centre processes large quantities of wasted food which have been discarded by food growers and producers, distribution companies, grocery delivery services, and food retailers throughout the Netherlands. These products are mostly bought at reduced cost and sometimes collected through donations. After sorting and processing these food waste materials, the products are sold to caterers, restaurants, and other businesses. Tomaat also donates a reported 20% of their products to the *voedselbank* (food bank). As I came to discover, the numbers such as the quantity of food donated vary enormously week-to-week.

At the time of my research, Tomaat retained seven full time employees and three full time interns. I started as a volunteer but was soon offered a paid position. The employees are, with the exception of myself, all Dutch. They hail from middle class backgrounds, and most grew up in smaller villages outside of the city where Tomaat is located. Two of the co-founders were shaped by their experiences of working in food retail, as the waste they witnessed at a supermarket inspired them enough to leave their secure careers in pursuit of their idealistic dream to save food from being wasted. Tomaat is absolutely a passion project for both founders, as was evident in their daily involvement with operational procedures. Two account managers previously worked within the food supply industry and eagerly joined the company to facilitate its growth and sustainable impact. They are both invaluable resources to establish new connections with food producers and generated numerous streams of food waste products that enhanced the stability and resilience of the food rescue practices at Tomaat. Interns hold significant responsibilities within the organisation. Two of them shared responsibility for the social media and marketing of the company, and the third worked within the warehouse to support logistics. The varied backgrounds and assorted positions at Tomaat create a dynamic team, where each individual holds a unique role in allowing the organisation to function. Most significant were the differences in the way that the people of Tomaat were compensated for their time working there, which varied from monthly intern stipends of several hundred euros to full time salaries.

Upon entering the warehouse in which the operations of Tomaat take place, one is instantly greeted with a three-metre-high wooden painted sign declaring 'Come in and rescue food!' Walking through the main front hall towards the back, one passes the cleaning storage closet and then enters the middle hall, in which the freezer and cold storage hold all the food products that are kept at -18 degrees Celsius and 3 degrees, respectively. The final two spaces of the Tomaat centre are in the back and consist of the sorting hall and the 'room temperature' food storage. The sorting hall is a large space with more industrial shelving holding boxes and crates, and revolving quantities of dried foods or room temperature foods on pallets. The high ceilings accommodate the three-level industrial metal shelving holding large plastic storage containers, plastic wrapped pallets stacked with packages of Tomaat's own brand of beer and granola, used plastic crates and stacked wooden pallets. The *winkel* (shop) is also in this room, a shelf holding boxes of food which are not quite good enough to resell but definitely too good to throw away, from which the staff are free to take products for home consumption.

At the start of the day, the operations team gets to work sorting the products into standard quantities and containers. For several months, all products were put into new boxes, the standard large and small black cardboard boxes that Tomaat buys. Towards the end of my fieldwork, the operations manager placed more emphasis on saving materials and reusing cardboard, so products are kept in their original boxes if they are sturdy and fit the standard size for carts and shipping. He also moved to standardise quantities for each product on the website to enhance consistency and facilitate an easy ordering experience. This sorting process is the pivotal moment of transition for food waste and holds all potential for the reconceptualization from waste product to edible resource. After careful examination using the senses, products are either kept and weighed into boxes to be stored in the cooling rooms or thrown away (Figure 1).

**Figure 1** - Oranges that have been sorted, with 'bad' oranges on the left and 'good' oranges on the right.



When all the products are sorted, the boxes are counted, entered on the new packing slip, photographed, and uploaded to the Tomaat website (Figure 2). The boxes are each labelled with Tomaat stickers printed with the product name, quantity, date sorted, and supplier information, wheeled on carts into the storage, and placed in their designated location according to product type. This stage requires some logistical manoeuvring to ensure that "first in, first out" standards are met, and moving stacks of cardboard boxes which have become slightly soggy from humidity can be very precarious.

**Figure 2** - Photos taken of sorted, ready-to-buy food waste products, uploaded to the Tomaat online market.



The storage areas in the warehouse always seem to be nearing maximum capacity; every pallet of rescued-tomato ketchup feels like the last one that can squeeze into the back shelving area, but each week there is more to be stored and the operations employees find a way to make it fit. With more suppliers sending entire pallets of a single product, space is constantly being bartered with and maximised; much employee time is spent moving products around to accommodate new products. Decisions to give quantities of a product to the *voedselbank* (food bank) often comes down to storage, and most frequently donated fruits and vegetables are those that take up space, sell slowly, and come in large quantities, such as spinach and carrots.

The second half of the day revolves around picking customer orders. At this point, the food waste has been chosen as an edible food, fulfilling the goal of the food rescuing operations. My knowledge of Dutch food vocabulary is most tested during this practice, because order forms and all food labels are in Dutch. One of my linguistic mix-ups became a favourite teasing joke, when I sent five 15 kilo boxes of *ananassen* (pineapples) after a customer had actually ordered *perssinaasappels* (juice oranges). The end of the day involves finishing orders and performing quality checks on the products remaining in the halls, and tallying the quantities of food left, noting which products are running low.

In response to the economic challenge of reducing food waste within the current system of economic norms, the stance of Tomaat is best exemplified with this quote from the co-founder: '*we are activists with a business mindset!*' Tomaat actively participates within the global food trade, buying and selling food waste products through a capitalist model based on the financial value of food. The account managers at Tomaat are responsible for finding streams of food waste materials from food distributors and producers, and forge agreements to acquire those food waste materials at a cost. Tomaat typically buys food waste at 50-60% of the market value, and then sells it for a higher price (though still lower than normal retailer prices). The purchase rate depends on the quantity and quality of the food, and which supplier the food comes from. Most of the food



waste suppliers ask for a 'cut' from Tomaat and receive a percentage of the money made when their food product is ordered. Tomaat prioritises products that will sell, and so the business arrangements are established based on forecasting of which products the customers are most likely to buy. In attempts to ensure that transactions with suppliers are profitable for the company, Tomaat orders and approves deliveries of food waste to the food rescue centre that are desirable, easy to sort, and will have a longer shelf life.

One such product was *courgette* (zucchini). In early March 2022, a large shipment of yellow *courgette* arrived, and when the operations manager consulted the current market value, he was shocked. *'This is the highest price I've ever seen for a vegetable!'* He explained that the Dutch *courgette* producers had trouble yielding enough crops to meet the demands of the market, and so the price had skyrocketed. Though ominous news for the food industry, he was excited that this would enhance the desirability of discounted, rescued *courgette* through the Tomaat online marketplace. Tomaat set the price just slightly lower than the going rate, and the yellow *courgette* quickly disappeared from the storage room. This is how Tomaat typically sets prices. When food products are put online, they compare prices from a food market forum and the main online retailers available through search engine queries. After taking this into account, the food is usually priced at about 80% of the market price. Another employee emphasised in a conversation with me the importance of maintaining competitive prices. He believes that food waste products should be priced close to the market value of similar products in the mainstream food supply chain, because if they are priced too low, they are perceived as too cheap and therefore undesirable.

### **Aardbei: Rescue practices at a pop-up restaurant**

My second field site was Aardbei, a nonprofit foundation which aims to reduce food waste at the consumer level through weekly dinners, workshops, and catered events that promote the consumption of rescued food. The wasteless dinners at Aardbei are cooked using food collected from markets which would have otherwise been thrown away. Food that is not cooked or is near the end of its edible life can be taken by people for free.

The location of Aardbei operations is on a residential street, in a building which was inaugurated originally as a squat. New visitors frequently struggle to find the exact door, as the outside entry is decorated with creatively anti-establishment stickers and banners but lacks a definitive label describing what lies behind each of the three plain black doors. The space is also currently home to several refugee families who have established themselves in a large gymnasium-like space, and apparently there are several apartment units used as artist studios and residences which I have never seen. One of the front doors leads to an office which several environmental groups use as a workspace, and has the feel of a cosy bohemian living room with the spice of rebellion headquarters. This ambiance of artistic, underground, alternative expression permeates the whole atmosphere of the premises, including the large main space which Aardbei rents every Wednesday for the wasteless dinners. The full industrial kitchen is stocked with necessary equipment for cooking large quantities of rescued veggies, a vast array of mismatched serving bowls and eating tools, and a large jar filled with (very dull) knives. Each visit to Aardbei, this container reminded me that I should have brought my knife sharpener.

Aardbei is operated by a board of directors and a large volunteer base. It has a flat hierarchy, in which sociocratic decisions are made by the members of the group and any volunteer stakeholders with a desire to become involved. During the time of my research, the board was in a state of flux as members stepped down and new members stepped into leadership roles. The dinner coordinator is the only position within the organisation that receives compensation, which amounts to a monthly stipend of 150 euros. Due to the heavy reliance on volunteers without any fixed obligations, most of my contacts at Aardbei did not have the clear roles within the organisation in the same way that Tomaat employs distinct positions, and the social dynamics changed drastically from week to week.

At Aardbei, the dominant language is English and the majority of volunteers are international. My informants are between the ages of 20 and 60, and hailed from all over the world, including the US, Central and South America, Europe and Asia. Most Aardbei volunteers are students studying in the Netherlands and are attracted to the organisation for social and community oriented reasons, as well as shared interest in environmental activism. My being an international student interested in environmentalism situated me exactly within the demographic of my informants. By entering my name in the spreadsheet of volunteers at Aardbei, I was immediately included in the core volunteer power of the organisation. I acted in every volunteer role within Aardbei, and I experienced nothing but open doors as I conducted my research.

The operating procedures at Aardbei consist of three volunteer shifts. The first is the pickup, when volunteers take the organisation's *bakfiets* (cargo bike) and wield it several kilometres away to a busy food market street. Once there, the pickup volunteer proceeds to go through a list of twelve designated shops with semi-established relationships, asking for food which may be bound for the trash. The precarity of these relationships is made apparent by the confusion and frequent refusal that the pick-up volunteers face when asking for food waste; oftentimes the shopkeeper does not understand, and thinks they are just begging for free food. Another element of precarity exists in the language barriers between volunteers and shopkeepers, most of whom speak Dutch as a second language, with very little conversational English. Eventually the volunteers face the much heavier journey back to drop off the food waste materials (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3** - Bakfiets filled with food waste products. Additional volunteer bike basket contains rescued ginger.



In the early afternoon, the second step of volunteer shifts begins, with the arrival of the cooking volunteers and the dinner coordinator. The dinner coordinator decides what will be cooked using the available food waste products, a choice which requires extensive knowledge regarding diverse food ingredients, creativity, and adaptability, as she ensures that the menu uses as many of the food waste products as possible. The cooking shift works throughout the afternoon preparing the food waste products into a vegan, three course meal, consisting of an appetiser, main dish, and dessert. While the dinner coordinator holds authority over the ultimate choices of what to serve, volunteer voices are appreciated and encouraged, and in the best circumstances, the meal

comes together as a true performance of collaboration and teamwork. The cooking shift at Aardbei concludes with a volunteer dinner, during which everyone that participated in creating the dinner, including each volunteer shift, sit assembled at a long table and enjoy the fruits of their labour together.

After sharing the meal together, the last shift of volunteers prepares to serve the Wasteless Dinner to guests. Throughout the evening, people from the community come to eat, pay a donation to the dinner coordinator at the door, and find themselves a cosy table. Following the turmoil of the coronavirus pandemic, the Aardbei board emphasised efforts to recruit musicians and artists to perform during the dinners most evenings. As patrons leave, the serving volunteers clean up.

An important element of the food rescuing missions implemented by both Tomaat and Aardbei is educating consumers about food waste reduction. Tomaat, through social media campaigns and the publication of their own food waste cookbook, promotes the idea that consumers can have a positive impact by reducing food waste in their own households. Through their educational materials, Tomaat highlights various ways of preserving food products to ensure that they will last longer, including drying, pickling, fermenting, freezing, curing, and smoking. These practices prolong the life of food materials, so that fresh produce and meat won't become rotten or spoiled and need to be thrown away. Aardbei also promotes learning opportunities through their wasteless dinners and also food-saving workshops. Innovative food waste-based meals are at the centre of Aardbei's mission to save food, and each wasteless dinner is the culmination of the knowledge of the specific group of volunteers. During one cooking shift, I learned to make "quickles" (quick pickles) consisting of sliced carrots, beets, and cabbage, preserved with boiling water and vinegar, which I have made regularly since. On another occasion, the pick-up volunteers collected an abundance of stale bread, and Aardbei held a bread pudding-making workshop. By teaching volunteers and the wider community how food waste materials may be used in delicious recipes, the knowledge of food saving practices transfers from the organisation to the home, spreading awareness and solutions to the problem of household food waste simultaneously.

## The Materiality of Food Waste

I approached my fieldwork and resolved to follow the food as it underwent the semiotic transformation from waste to resource. This section focuses on the multi-sensory experience of food waste rescue, and how interactions between human and non-human actors within the food waste network generate food rescuing practices. Material semiotics, the methodological lens through which materials imbue meaning, illuminates the ways that how food waste is defined and measured changes how it is understood and addressed (Law, 2019). My immersion into the role of food rescuer at Aardbei and Tomaat led me to intimate, multi-sensory interactions with food materials which shaped my understanding of the food waste network. While I worked at Tomaat and Aardbei, hundreds of kilos of fruits and vegetables passed through my hands and the hands of my respondents and into either the stew pot, garbage can, or storage box. Through these movements and spatial allocations, I was entranced by the physical material qualities that determined where food ended up. Food waste rescue practices are based on specialised knowledge regarding the biological (de)composition of a food product, how the food product is used, and how its vitality may be prolonged.

Different food products are framed as waste by actors within the global food system, and food waste reduction transforms these framings through processes of sorting and redistribution. Waste is largely determined through association, and may be configured spatially (Lehtokunnas and Pyyhtinen, 2022). An example of this spatial configuration may be highlighted through the box of *rode pepers* (Figure 4). This particular box may have been framed as waste because of the contaminating pepper juice. The human actors knew pepper juice could permeate the whole pallet, creating the perfect environment for mould. Within the global food value chain, it makes more economic sense to discard the whole pallet than to sort through the

boxes, resulting in massive waste. However, this framing may be spatially reconfigured, through the separation of crates, or better yet, by moving all of the “good” *pepers* into clean containers. Sorting and re-arranging food materials to save and prolong their vitality is a key practice within food waste rescue organisations.

**Figure 4** - Rode peper (red hot pepper) which has been sorted out due to mould.



Another example concerns pallets originating from a supplier that specialises in exotic fruits. The pallets contain, among other things, boxes full of mangoes. These mangoes, which originated from Burkina Faso before landing in the Dutch food supply chain, underwent a material change which inherently transformed their status as an edible resource. The changing colour and smells emitted from the ripening fruit determined their value as a food resource; as the mangoes’ vitality waned, so did their value as a food commodity. When they arrive, the mangoes, luckily, are mostly green with visually pleasing patches of peachy pink and orange. This batch is perfect, with at least a week before the orange and pink areas cover the fruit and they become a “sell fast” item. I put several of the softest, brightest fruits into the *winkle*, and then move the stickered boxes into the storage hall. Over the course of the next week, the boxes of mangoes gradually dwindle as orders are placed. The mangoes have begun to change; their sweet smell grows stronger, and they are soft to the touch (Figure 5). Some mangoes remain smooth and green, while others exhibit a wrinkly texture and prominent pinkish-reds and oranges. More mangoes are being moved to the *winkle* because they are too ripe to sell, and the operations manager reminds us of the importance of quality checks for any box going into an order. I arrived one Friday morning to find that all of the mangoes in the storage hall were gone; the remainder was donated to the Voedselbank (food bank).

**Figure 5** - Mangoes in varying states of ripeness; as the mangoes become soft and change from green to orange and pink hues, they become a “sell fast” item.



Avocados form a third example. Avocados are a product that Tomaat keeps in stock consistently. The rate of saving avocados is high because of their popularity and the stability of their biological qualities, largely due to the protective skin and the fact that avocados do not start to ripen until after they are plucked from the tree, making them easier to ship. However, if the avocados at Tomaat fail to pass a quality check throughout their stay in the cooled storage of the Tomaat warehouse, or when they are picked for an order, they may be ‘destroyed’ due to softness, loss of rounded shape, or even colour.

Avocados, and other food waste products, undergo a completely different valuation system at Aardbei. Avocados that are rescued on a Wednesday morning will be used immediately that day and served with the wasteless Wednesday dinner. One Wednesday in March, myself and three other volunteers filled the *bakfiets* with a plethora of collected food waste, including several boxes of avocados. We were very satisfied with this collection, because we shared the knowledge that avocados can be used for a wide variety of healthy, delicious meals, and felt confident that our work as collecting volunteers would result in a successful dinner later that night. The dinner coordinator had the idea to make use of the avocados for frozen lime tarts as a dessert. The avocados were cut in half, the brown, inedible spots were cut away and discarded with the pits and skins, while the edible flesh was scooped and added to a bowl for use in the dessert dish. Because Aardbei uses avocados (and all other collected food waste products) immediately, the sorting process allows the inclusion of cutting away ‘bad’ parts of individual products, which optimises how much of the food can be saved. The avocados that we collected for Aardbei were misshapen, very soft, and dark in colour, and an evaluation at Tomaat would have certainly classified them as unsellable, and, if not taken home by employees, destroyed. At Tomaat, the saving of food is limited by time, and, additionally, by space and quantity, as each product is sold by weight, and only whole products are sold (so no cutting away of brown spots).

The ‘*worst part of the job*’ at Tomaat as described by several people on separate occasions, is dumping food into the biogas bins in the front of the warehouse. There were days when the majority of the food I was meant to rescue through the sorting process was tossed in the biogas bins; the consolation being that at least the food was directed towards a sustainable initiative rather than the incinerator. Dumping food was especially disheartening when the discarded materials consisted of frozen products past their expiration date. Because Tomaat is held to government regulations of ‘use by’ dates, the meat and processed food packages which are

stored in the deep freezer must be thrown away four months after they have gone into the freezer. From a biological perspective these products are perfectly safe to eat because they have been frozen at -18 degrees Celsius, but Tomaat has a legal obligation to stop selling the products past this date, and sometimes large quantities of this food is destroyed if it hasn't been sold in time. Any other food product that has passed the expiration date must also be discarded, even though dry goods and preserves are safe past this time.

I was dumping two large trash bins filled with frozen steak cuts, vegetarian “chicken” nuggets, and camembert cheese into the biogas bins one day, when a colleague at Tomaat came over to retrieve some to take home. ‘*This cow died for nothing*’, he remarked, and this statement struck me as the saddest moment of my fieldwork. Not only were we throwing away this meat that could be taken home by any consumer and made into a rather expensive, high-quality meal, but many animals died for these packages of meat to be consumed and that sacrifice was not even being respected. This interaction with the discarded meat raises questions of the material qualities of specific food waste; why did it feel worse to throw away food that came from an animal, than food that is plant based? Understanding the global food system requires mapping the networks between human and non-human actors, and this process must account for the slaughter of domesticated animals for human consumption. Turner (2019) described it best in describing the multi-species reality of eating, saying that “we never eat alone”.

Discarding food, however, did not always feel so bad. While the nausea-inducing smell of noxious pepper juice certainly never abated, my overall perception of mould and rotting food certainly became normalised quickly. From basketball game-based competitions of throwing mushy pumpkins across the sorting hall into the dumpster, to sifting through 15-kilogram crates of *regenboog penen* (rainbow carrots) and feeling a slimy mess instead of a firm rod, the visceral response to decidedly “bad” food products became a sort of playful practice at Tomaat (Figure 6). While very obviously categorised as non-edible, disposing of these products was an integral part of the food saving job.

**Figure 6** - Touching an unexpected mass of slime instead of a hard carrot instantly invoked a disgusted yelp by the unlucky food waste sorter.



## Challenges to food rescuing practices

The largest hurdles to effectively saving food from being wasted are the economic pressures of the globalised food system for a distribution level company such as Tomaat, and the mobilisation of volunteers for a foundation such as Aardbei. The methodological lens of Actor Network Theory serves well here to illustrate how the food waste network is held together through fragile relations.

The goal of saving food as an environmentally and socially positive act resonates strongly at Tomaat, but time and time again I was reminded of the bottom-line company mentality that food waste equates to money. Saving food from being wasted is the idealistic goal of Tomaat, but the very vitality of food and the capitalistic system in which food waste rescue, at the distribution level, must operate in order to be profitable harbours conflict between idealism and economic realities.

A calculated component of Tomaat practices is the “worthiness” of sorting through quantities of food waste materials. As suppliers check in with the operations manager to let him know which products are available, the notification includes the quality of the food products measured on a scale of very high quality to very low quality. The operations manager then decides if the products will be worth sorting through and agrees to deliveries of the chosen products. In some cases, the food is more damaged or contaminated with inedible food than he had expected, and he evaluates on the spot if the entire quantity should be meticulously sorted or thrown away to save time and energy. When a large proportion of soft skinned products from a shipment are mouldy, oftentimes the entire quantity is thrown away, due to the extensive time it takes to sort out the bad products.

In one instance, a large pallet from a food waste supplier came into the warehouse, which the supplier had warned contained a large percentage of spoiled products. Rather than rejecting outright, we wanted to evaluate how much could be saved. I was set the task of going through boxes of tomatoes, saving what I could and tossing the rest into the biogas bin. After about half an hour, I had saved six boxes of tomatoes, and thrown away over forty boxes. The manager assessed the sorting and decided it was too time consuming, and therefore expensive, and instructed me to throw the rest away. I took 5 kilos home, with the intention of making tomato sauce which could be preserved. Tragically, as I cycled home the entire box was jostled and the smashed tomatoes were completely mouldy by the next morning. Despite my best intentions, the rescued tomatoes were lost anyway (Figure 7).

**Figure 7** - Jostled tomatoes easily become bruised, and the broken exterior of the tomato can grow mouldy in a matter of hours.



This episode played out in much the same way as many mornings at the Tomaat warehouse. Despite the “best intentions” of the organisation to accept relatively “bad” quality food and saving as much as possible, the constraints of time and labour power really limit how many resources are spent in the sorting process. Effective sorting is very time consuming, and the physical assessment of every individual fruit is necessary with soft skinned products, because one smashed tomato in a box of 50 can pollute all the rest in a matter of days.

Aardbei, on the other hand, de-commodifies the food waste materials that are collected from food vendors. The redistribution of food at Aardbei works outside of the traditional market driven food system because the food waste materials do not retain or obtain an assigned economic value as it is collected from the retailers. As Aardbei volunteers move the *bakfiets* from shop to shop, they approach food sellers with the repeated phrase, ‘*Good morning, we are from [Aardbei], do you have any food that you are throwing away?*’ The requested food has already been rejected, and the shopkeepers no longer treat those materials as a valuable commodity. The exchange of food waste is enacted as a system of giving, of donating food to the organisation’s cause. The shopkeeper has released the monetary value which they had originally assigned to the food products when they placed price signs near the crates of fruits and vegetables.

After volunteers have collected, sorted, and cooked the collected food waste materials, the customers at the restaurant consume the three-course meal in exchange for a donation to Aardbei, usually between five and ten euros. Donation-based value is still a sort of financial exchange, though radically different from other pricing systems. The donation-based wasteless dinner allows participation by virtually anyone from any socio-economic class and creates an inclusive atmosphere while also supporting the existence of the foundation. Aardbei presents rescued food primarily as a shared, collective meal. The food waste resource becomes the happy object that brings community together, and the performance of food waste reduction represents an alternative food system being played out by the human and non-human actors. Excess food which is not cooked in the meal, whether because there were inadequate quantities to cook, the products did not fit into the menu, or the products are not vegan, are available for anyone to take for free.

The gift economy of food, labour, and a donation for the meals, while posing an alternative to the market economy, are also the organisation’s Achilles heel. The operations at Aardbei are fully dependent upon the mobilisation of volunteers, and without their participation the organisation fails. My immediate inclusion within the group at Aardbei illustrated how desperately the organisation needs consistent volunteers. One of the largest challenges faced by the foundation lies in maintaining consistent volunteers for the pick-up shift. Without the regular collection of food products, the other shifts are futile, and unfortunately volunteers feel that the pick-up is the least desirable for a variety of reasons. The 9 o’clock meeting time is early, the *bakfiets* is perilously heavy, asking for free food from shop owners can be awkward, and oftentimes volunteers must complete the shift alone. On my second day researching at Aardbei, I was the only volunteer signed up for the pick-up shift, an experience which clearly demonstrated why recruiting and retaining volunteers is an enormous difficulty. My research at Aardbei had only very recently begun, and I wrestled with the idea that I was a researcher, but also the only pillar keeping the organisation’s mission standing that day. Without the crates of fresh products I brought to Aardbei, the dinner would have failed. In a similar vein, another volunteer that began around the same time as me, described how she felt like a leader after just one day.

Such experiences conveyed responsibility and a deep sense of involvement with the fundamental goals of the organisation, which penetrates the motivations of other heavily involved volunteers. But not all. The shared responsibility was especially apparent somewhat later, when a volunteer had signed up to pick up food, but fully abandoned their duty; in the early afternoon, cooking volunteers arrived at Aardbei to find barren tables and no food. One energetic volunteer called the others to action, requesting ‘*if you’ve got things in your own fridge going bad... bring it.*’ Several volunteers raided their pantries and brought whatever food they



could find and together the cooking team put together a feast of ‘small bites’. The dinner was a success, and exemplified adaptability and playful engagement with available food resources, a necessary knowledge set in food-saving practices.

An even more shocking event took place about one month into working at Tomaat, when an alarming discovery led to a sharp turn in my research, reshaping my perception of the food waste saving practices and the priorities of the organisation. For context, Tomaat receives and processes shipments of food waste from a number of suppliers, most of which are wholesale distributors that work with grocery stores and other retailers. In the first weeks of my fieldwork, the most significant food waste supplier that worked with Tomaat began to exhibit logistical issues, and then altogether stopped sending Tomaat any food waste: the company had gone bankrupt. This supplier had been the perfect business partner for Tomaat, because of the vast variety of products they dealt with, the large quantities of waste, and their ability to make mixed pallets of products, so Tomaat received many different desirable products in manageable quantities. The loss of this supplier had the potential to sink Tomaat; without food waste to sell, there was no business to be run. The leadership of the company had to make a decision.

Another company, Kiwi (name changed for anonymity), had been a supplier for Tomaat since the beginning of my fieldwork, and I had not thought twice about how these deliveries were almost always perfect fruits and vegetables that barely required sorting before being stored and sold. When the large supplier went down, Tomaat started ordering products from Kiwi almost daily, until by late March there were four to six pallets from Kiwi every day. In a casual conversation with the operations manager while he was explaining how suppliers for Tomaat are found by the account managers and partnerships are negotiated, he told me that Kiwi was ‘*run by a guy that buys fruits and vegetables at auctions for really cheap*,’ and that Tomaat was given a good deal. I came to learn that these products which I had sorted, organised and packed in orders for months were not food waste at all. The reality of the situation clicked: Tomaat was selling products purported to be waste material to their customers, with an absolute lack of transparency about their source. Every box of food at Tomaat receives a sticker to identify the type of product, date of sorting, and other details, and a small number that indicates the supplier so that the item can be traced. The number for Kiwi was stuck to many products in the Tomaat warehouse.

Regardless of the stated intentions, the ethical implications of selling non-food waste products as food waste seriously undermines Tomaat’s idealist mission to combat food waste and make a meaningful, environmental impact. These actors of the food waste network became involved with the capitalist system they were seeking to reconstruct, changing both the inherent materialities of the food products they were dealing with, and compromising their basic legitimacy as a company that claims to be a sustainable alternative source for rescued food products. However, without the supplies from Kiwi, Tomaat would have been unable to survive and therefore not rescued *any* food. Previous research concerning the practices of food retailers in their ordering of products contend that retailers strive to avoid out of stock situations, to preserve their image and brand (Theotokis et al., 2012; Alhonnoro et al., 2020). Tomaat certainly avoided an out-of-stock situation, and by keeping it secret maintained their brand image as a sustainable company.

The supplement of non-food waste materials was a response to insufficient food waste materials; the system is held together through the networks linking non-human food to other actors in the food network. The system changes significantly depending on the availability of food products, resulting in a priority of consistently keeping specific foods in-stock over the integrity of every food product being salvaged waste.

The purchase of non-food waste products by Tomaat bolstered not only the variety and quantity of food products in-stock at the warehouse, but also significantly cut down on the time required to sort and process the food products. When fennel arrived from a food waste supplier, each individual was critically inspected for brown spots and any signs of decomposition before being designated as an edible material and being passed

from the shipping container into Tomaat boxes. The fennel delivered by the non-food waste supplier required barely a glance before being dumped en masse into the new containers. Though the reliance on non-food waste supplies as a supplement was viewed as a necessary evil, the Tomaat company certainly viewed these products as more 'perfect' and desirable than other products. Accordingly, the organisation established an aesthetic hierarchy very similar to the system which they claimed to work against. Food waste rescue is based on changing the conceptions of edible food, normalising physical imperfections, and promoting the use of products which consumers have been socialised to believe are 'bad'. The adoption of non-food waste products at Tomaat, and the implications for standards that the customers expected to receive when ordering what they believe to be food waste, is damaging to this central component of food rescue practices.

## Conclusion

Food rescue organisations respond to the prevailing ethical and environmental travesty of global food waste, and while their strategies are founded on this idealistic, well-intentioned goal, the existing capitalistic food system and logistical hurdles frequently obstruct the success of food rescue practices.

Food waste rescue operations work within the food supply chain to save edible food from the landfill and redistributing food resources to consumers. The network of growers and farmers, distributors, transporters, retailers, and consumers, is involved with the process as food initially 'becomes' waste and is then reconceptualised throughout its life in the food waste chain. In this article I have explored the intricacies of the daily operating procedures at Aardbei and Tomaat, and the organisations' respective implementation of practices and organisational policies which affect their capacity to rescue food. All rescued food at both Tomaat and Aardbei are products of the globalised food system, passing through the Netherlands as they are exported throughout the globe. Tomaat and Aardbei function as additional links within the globalised food chain, as they work to respond to the systemic problem of food waste through redistribution. At a basic level, both Aardbei and Tomaat agree upon the circular economic concept that food waste is a usable resource which may be redistributed as edible food, and both appeal to the ethos of environmentalism and climate change activism to entice customers and participants.

Though they share the overarching goal of reducing food waste, the two organisations operate within different levels of the food waste supply chain and differ in their fundamental arrangements of human and nonhuman actors within this network. A massive challenge to both food rescue organisations is the conflict of interest between food waste reduction and current economic norms and practices (Messner et al., 2020). The human actors involved with food rescue practices at Aardbei approach this challenge through a radically alternative, anti-capitalist ideology, as they claim to reject the industrial power structures of the food system and donate transformed food waste materials to the local community. On the other hand, Tomaat attempts to actively participate within the economic norms of the food chain, by agreeing to the allocation of financial value to food waste materials and engaging with other actors in the food chain. The involvement in the market goes so far for Tomaat that it also accepts and sells large quantities of non-waste food, in order to have a reliable supply in stock, which is a necessary prerequisite to keep its food-rescuing activities going.

My research reveals a major takeaway, that by approaching food waste reduction as a normalised practice *within* the globalised food system or as an alternative system *outside* of the globalised system, the food waste itself becomes a political player with its own agency. Despite the many challenges to the implementation of food waste reduction, Tomaat and Aardbei do exemplify two groups of people that identify a global problem and feel compelled to action, and their undertakings are far from trivial. The founders of Tomaat recognise the power of food distributors in the Netherlands to significantly decrease their waste and have executed a

business plan in which large quantities of food are redirected from the landfill. Their emphasis on economic sustainability and making food waste profitable is perhaps the most realistic method to participate within the globalised food system while normalising food saving practices.

On the other hand, Aardbei operates outside of this globalised food system, while performing alternative practices of food procurement. The reliance on creativity and adaptability are the greatest assets of Aardbei operations, and my informants displayed tenacity and resilience as they mobilised in the face of pandemic restrictions and lack of human resources. While Tomaat and Aardbei rescue several thousand tons of food waste each year respectively, admittedly this quantity is a single pea in the great dumpster of global food waste. Nonetheless, perhaps the most meaningful impact accomplished by each organisation is the emphasis on education and setting an example. Volunteers from Aardbei conduct workshops at schools and universities throughout the city, and recruit high school students to participate in food-saving events. Tomaat circulates food waste cook books in three languages, and partners with other food waste-based companies to distribute their products. An example of these educational materials is a children's book titled *Meneer Tweebeenpeen* (Mister Two-leg-carrot), which seeks to normalise food products which do not fit the aesthetic standards of grocery retail giants. Through the multiplier effect, these streams of education and awareness may generate exponential societal impact, and great potential for increased participation in the movement to reduce food waste (Dahl, Løken, & Mogstad, 2014).

The fight to rescue food is not a waste.

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# Waste and disposal in Indigenous Lands: the experience of the Gavião Pyhcop Catiji with solid waste in the Amazon (Brazil)

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## **Abstract**

The volume of solid waste that accumulates in Indigenous Lands in the Amazon today increases the ecological and political problems of the indigenous peoples, requiring reflection and action against garbage coming from urban areas. This article aims to describe how the Gavião people deal with the garbage discarded within the Governor Indigenous Land, identifying management practices and classification schemes according to the Gavião. Over 60 years of disposal in the Governor Indigenous Land, waste has been linked to periods of proximity and distance from the urban centers, requiring specific management practices. The categories 'poisonous waste', 'dangerous waste', and 'our waste' indicate dimensions of agency present in the waste, and imply different ways of dealing with each waste. Reflecting on different human abilities in dealing with waste enables us to take a new look at our problems with petroleum derivatives and human life on the planet.

**Key-words:** Solid Waste, Indigenous Lands, Gavião Pyhcop Catiji, Amazon.

# Lixo e descarte em Terras Indígenas: a experiência dos Gavião Pyhcop Catiji com resíduos sólidos na Amazônia (Brasil)

## Resumo

O volume de resíduos sólidos que hoje se acumulam em Terras Indígenas da Amazônia aumenta os problemas de ordem ecológica e política dos povos indígenas, exigindo reflexões e ações frente ao lixo vindo da cidade. O objetivo deste artigo é descrever o modo como os Gavião lidam com o lixo descartado dentro da Terra Indígena Governador, identificando práticas de manejo e esquemas de classificação segundo os Gavião. Durante 60 anos de descarte na Terra Indígena Governador os resíduos estiveram relacionados com períodos de proximidade e de afastamento da cidade, exigindo práticas específicas de manejo. As categorias *lixo veneno*, *lixo perigo* e *lixo nosso* indicam dimensões de agencialidade presentes nos resíduos e que implicam em modos distintos de se relacionar com cada lixo. Refletir sobre diferentes habilidades humanas no trato com o lixo possibilita lançar novos olhares sobre nossos problemas com os derivados do petróleo e a vida humana no planeta.

**Palavras-chave:** Resíduos Sólidos, Terras Indígenas, Gavião Pyhcop Catiji, Amazônia.

# Waste and disposal in Indigenous Lands: the experience of the Gavião Pyhcop Catiji with solid waste in the Amazon (Brazil)

*Maycon Melo, Airton Alves de Lima and Francarlos Diniz Ribeiro*

## **Introduction**

From 2018 to 2022, deforestation, fire, and illegal mining rates escalated in Indigenous Lands in Brazil. Through Bolsonaro's government, these actions gained strength and legal backing from the State and put the lives of indigenous peoples in the Amazon at risk (Ferrante, Fearnside, 2022; Mataveli et al., 2022; Silva Júnior et al., 2023). But this is an image from above the Amazon rainforest, an image made over the canopy, as remote sensing images are. A silent agent that has been endangering the lives of different living beings in the cities is also inside the world's largest rainforest, adding to the ecological, political, and social problems of the indigenous peoples: plastics.

Industrialized petroleum derivatives, which do not deteriorate over time, have been inside forests and villages for many years, becoming a problem for indigenous peoples and requiring ways to deal with the waste from the city (Arisi, Cantero, 2016). Before being discarded, this waste was once a consumer product. The desire and dependence on industrialized goods have increased among indigenous people over the years (Gordon, 2006), bringing more and more plastic and solid waste into Indigenous Lands.

The image of a village accumulating more and more garbage is an image that alerts us to the extent of the destruction that human beings have wrought upon planet Earth. For some, it could be a warning sign that we have entered a path of self-destruction with no return. But is it? The answer is both yes and no.

In the wake of garbage, or from an anthropological approach to garbage (Colombijn, Rial, 2016), we believe that reflecting on different human abilities in dealing with garbage enables us to take a new look at the ways of producing social inequalities in post-industrial societies and on human life on the planet.

This reflection focuses on the indigenous Gavião Pyhcop Catiji people, speakers of the Macro-Jê linguistic trunk and identified as Timbira people (Nimuendaju, 1946). The Gavião live in the Governador Indigenous Land, in the Amazon portion of the State of Maranhão, and have been living with the adverse effects of deforestation and fire on their lands, these being the major agenda of their struggles (Melo, Milanez, 2017). However, the generation of solid waste promoted by the indigenous people themselves has worried indigenous leaders, elders, and teachers in the villages.

In the last 60 years, the consumption of oil-derived goods has been present in the life of the Gavião people, as well as the garbage disposal within the villages. This article seeks to describe how the Gavião deal with the garbage discarded within the Governor Indigenous Land, identifying what this garbage is, describing solid waste management practices and garbage classification schemes according to the Gavião.

The discussion in this article is derived from ethnographic research (Peirano, 2014) with the Gavião people (TI Governador) conducted in the Governador Village. Some of these meetings took place in the capital of the State of Maranhão, São Luís, during actions of the indigenous movement or in specialized medical care. For the execution of the field research, we carried out "participant observation," understanding, observing, and participating not as opposites but as complementary in the process of learning something from someone (Ingold, 2017). The interlocutors of this work were, above all, village leaders, indigenous teachers, and elders.



We have divided the text into two parts. The first introduces the Gavião and outlines 60 years of consumption and disposal within the Governor Indigenous Land, drawing attention to a political dimension and reproduction of social inequalities established between postmodernity, consumption, and disposal. The second is inserted in an anthropological approach to garbage among indigenous peoples, describing the forms of solid waste management within the TI and some initial notes on the garbage classifications according to the Gavião perspective.

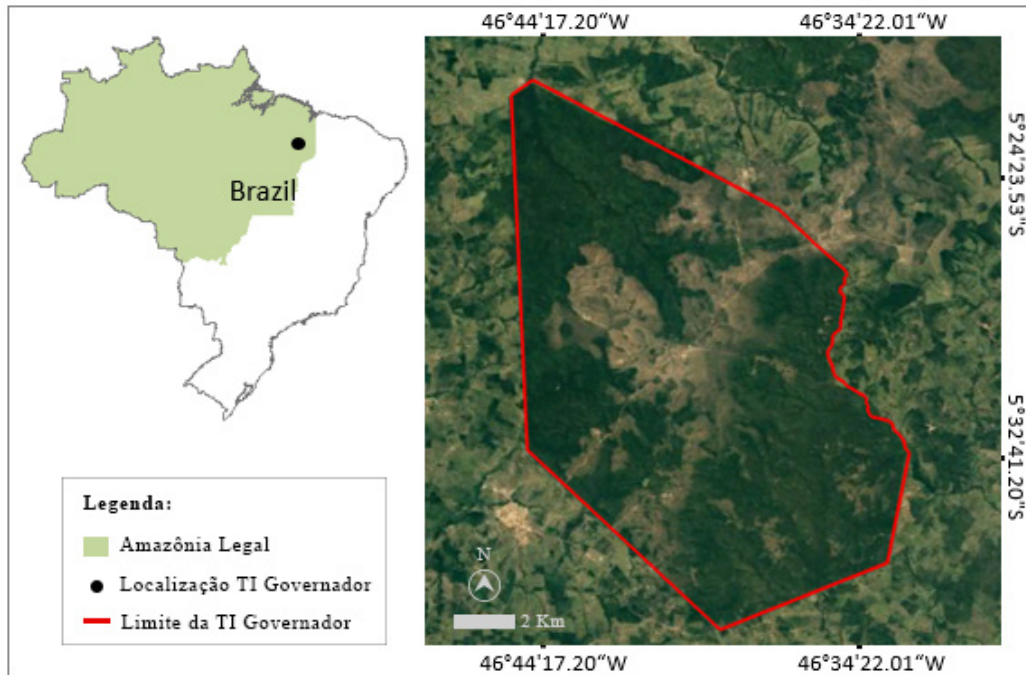
### **The Gavião people, waste and disposal: 60 years of consumption and solid waste management in the Governador Indigenous Land**

The Gavião Pyhcoo Catiji are speakers of a language of the Macro-Jê linguistic trunk and are classified as Timbira peoples (Nimuendaju, 1946). They live near the municipality of Amarante do Maranhão, in the southwestern part of Maranhão State. The region is known as the Pre-Amazon of Maranhão and extends across forested and cerrado areas. Currently, the Gavião live in 15 villages, with an estimated population of 1,200 people, resulting from an intense process of dispersion and concentration of new villages that occurred in the last 30 years within the territory itself (Melo, Soares, 2018).

The Gavião practice agriculture associated with extractivism, fishing, and hunting. All households in the Governor Indigenous Land receive Auxílio Brasil from the Federal Government, and families with children and adolescents between the ages of 4 and 16 receive Bolsa Escola. Besides these sources of income, there are retired people and two groups of wage earners in Governador Village: the teachers and some employees of FUNAI.

We can divide the history of the Gavião's contact with national society into three periods. The first records are from Major de Paula Ribeiro, in the mid-1800s, when he identified 15 groups on the banks of the Grajaú River in Maranhão (Nimuendaju, 1946). The action of the "pacification fronts" coming from the north of Maranhão, Pará, Tocantins, and Goiás in 1850 marked the second period. In 1950, a new "wave" of development hit the Gavião with the construction of the Belém-Brasília highway, bringing "southerners" and the high speculation of the lands around the Governor Indigenous Land (Barata, 1981). The third period is characterized by the concentration and dispersion of villages in the current territory, initiated by the need to remain together in the face of attacks from city dwellers in the 1980s and, later, motivated by the division and creation of new villages in the mid-1990s. This phenomenon of population dispersion was accentuated in the 2000s, when proto-gavião groups separated and returned to old territories once occupied by previous generations within the Governor Indigenous Land, creating new villages (Melo, 2017).

**Figure 1** - Location of the Governador Indigenous Land, Amarante do Maranhão, Maranhão, Brazil



Fonte: Melo et. al., 2022.

The periods that mark the history of contact of the Gavião people with Brazilian society indicate moments of greater or lesser proximity to non-indigenous people and their things. These cycles of closeness and estrangement bring narratives about conflicts and the Gavião's interest in industrialized goods or commodities. As interest in these commodities grew, as was recurrent with other peoples (Howard, 2002), so did the consumption and disposal of waste that does not decay within the Governor Indigenous Land.

To be sure, the Gavião's first exchanges, or purchases, with non-indigenous people, are much older than our records. However, older hunters report that the first "buying expeditions" were carried out around 1960 using as currency seeds of Cumaru (*Dipteryx odorata*), a typical tree in the region with analgesic and bronchodilatory functions. The seeds were collected in the forest during hunting expeditions or specific searches. The exchanges took place in a post of the Indian Protection Service (SPI), about 80 km from Aldeia Governador, in the Arariboia Indigenous Land, where the Guajajara people live and where the first SPI post in the region was established. The objects of interest to the Gavião were mainly metal, cloth, and medicine. The "buying expeditions" brought to the village machetes, sickles, swords, hammers, nails, salt, as well as beads and meters of cloth for making clothes. Another item of great interest was medicine to combat flu symptoms, specifically Aspirin, which arrived in the village in glass and plastic bottles.

In the 1970s, missionaries from the New Tribes arrived in the Governor's Indigenous Land, coming from the United States. Besides being missionaries, they were linguists who studied the Gavião language, translated the Bible, and began teaching the Gavião people to read and write in their own language and Portuguese. The missionaries also had great importance in maintaining the health of the population and treating illnesses with medicines they brought from abroad (Melo, 2017). However, the small paid services that the missionaries demanded from the indigenous population were of great interest to the Gavião. In exchange for small amounts of money, the indigenous people were required to perform various forms of manual labor, from cleaning a piece of land to building a house. The bills that circulated internally in the Governor's Indigenous Land were mainly those that came along with the missionaries. Light bulbs, radios, batteries, rifles, cartridges, and motors became more common and present inside the village, as well as some specific products such as oil, coffee, and sugar, which became objects of interest due to the proximity to the city that grew around them.

In the 1980s, the Gavião people lived this process of consumption of industrial goods intensely. It was the “time of money,” as the elders say. It was when FUNAI demarcated the Governor Indigenous Land, and the community began to receive compensation from the Vale do Rio Doce company due to the environmental impacts caused by the construction of the Belém-Carajas highway. The elders’ accounts tell that a helicopter descended on the village courtyard, from which the head of the FUNAI office emerged, soldiers armed with machine guns and a metal box filled with money. A long line formed, and the money was passed on to the representatives of the families that owned or worked in the “FUNAI field” (Melo, 2017). Electricity reached the Governor Indigenous Land and the school during this same period. Along with electric light and schooling, new consumer needs and desires arrived. Televisions, refrigerators, stoves, bedding, mattresses, containers, fabrics, shoes, perfumes, combs, flashlights, machetes, rifles, ammunition, and bicycles were bought in large quantities. In the case of bicycles, the elders say that it was the most valuable object that one could have in the village. Therefore, many people bought bicycles with their own money. When they broke down or got a flat tire, they were abandoned in a “bicycle graveyard” until they rusted or the weeds made them disappear. It was in the 1980s that alcohol entered with more intensity into the lives of the Gavião people, and along with it, bottles and glass containers that, until today, are a central concern for parents who fear that their children will cut their feet.

This scenario of consumption and disposal was more intense because all the Gavião, who in the 1980s lived in three villages, were concentrated in the village of Governador, where Funai installed a post. The Gavião sought protection as they fled from measles that had decimated an entire village and from attacks by townspeople who set fire to another one in the same period (Melo, 2017).

Between 1990 and 2000, the Gavião began to live with more tranquility and assistance from the State as they began to enjoy the benefits of public policies guaranteed by the Constitution after the demarcation of the land. Access to the money that came from Vale do Rio Doce, public policies on health, education, food, as well as population growth made it unfeasible for all the Gavião to live together in the same village. The houses around the courtyard grew, and another circle had to be built around the initial circle of houses; solid waste grew along with the houses and the population. Motorcycles, chainsaws, fishing and hunting materials, construction materials, and chemicals such as fuel and oil become more present and visible around the village. However, the great transformation that began in this decade is the degradation of the Governor’s Indigenous Land, mainly by loggers, which has caused great changes in the ways of life of the Gavião. Little by little, it became more necessary to resort to industrialized products, especially foodstuffs, to meet the population’s demand for food that continued to grow.

In mid-2010, a process of dispersal of the villages within the Governor Indigenous Land began, driven by different internal conflicts (Melo, Soares, 2018). The increase in the indigenous people’s purchasing power, assisted by social programs such as Bolsa Família and Bolsa Escola marks this period. This decade is also remembered for the intense conflicts with the city dwellers of Amarante do Maranhão, as well as the increasingly dramatic changes in their ways of life, driven, above all, by the environmental degradation of the Indigenous Lands in the Amazon (Silva et al., 2021). Packaging of different products, plastic bags, household appliances, motorcycle parts, bicycles, PET bottles, satellite dishes, glass, iron, and aluminum accumulated in the back of the houses or less busy places in the village. It was around 2015 that electronic waste also became more present inside the Governor Indigenous Land. Cell phones, batteries, and cameras start circulating through the hands of young people and receive the same destination as other waste—the back of the houses.

The years 2020 can be marked by two indicators. The first was the growing invasion of the Indigenous Land Governor, which forced the Gavião to review their hunting, fishing, gathering, opening of fields, and creation of villages (Melo et al., 2022). In addition, the economic crisis driven by the government of Jair Messias Bolsonaro, which had an openly anti-indigenous and anti-environmental agenda. The second was

the increase in consumer power, and the need for industrial goods, especially protein sources, has made recurrent consumption and disposal of products that did not occur with such large volumes. Today, every week, families go to the supermarkets of Amarante do Maranhão returning with bales of chicken, bags of rice, beans, couscous, sugar, coffee, cookies, snacks, powdered juice, bales of soda, jars of margarine, medicine, cleaning and personal hygiene products, clothes, shoes, and school supplies. Also more present are cell phones, household appliances, children's toys, soccer balls, hunting and fishing materials, bicycles, motorcycles, and car parts like the two trucks from Funai, which have been deteriorating in the village courtyard since the 1990s.

If non-indigenous people have lost the references that positioned them in “post-industrial societies,” those in which the service sector dominates the economy and not industry, it is evident that a society based on consumption produces more waste and discards than it can consume (Eriksen, 2010; Bauman, 2000). This same reality affects indigenous peoples in the Amazon.

In the case of the Gavião, the illegal anthropic action in the Governor Indigenous Land alters their ways of life, which makes them more dependent on industrial goods, especially foodstuffs from the city. At the same time that the Gavião are living with the environmental degradation of their territory and the increase of conflicts with city dwellers, they are living inside the villages with an increase of garbage coming from the city. The image of a village in the Amazon forest accumulating more and more garbage is a good way to think about the production of social inequalities at regional and international scales that occur in the Amazon. But it is also more than that.

### **Experience and perspective with garbage among the Gavião: *poisonous waste, dangerous waste, and our waste***

We know little about waste management in indigenous communities, but what we do know indicates that waste is a problem for indigenous peoples. It is a problem because it has severe implications for the health of these populations (Coimbra, 2014). It is also a problem of another nature because it starts from a conception of garbage different from ours, which triggers a distinct relationship between humans and waste.

An anthropological approach to garbage has given us elements to think about other dimensions of the interactions between humans and their garbage. Something that we believe to be very positive since different viewpoints on similar issues can replace simplistic solutions with contextualized answers and new perspectives (Colombijn, Rial, 2016). In this sense, considering the increase of garbage in Indigenous Lands in the Amazon, we can ask ourselves: What is garbage for the Gavião? What management do they do with their waste? How do they live with industrial waste inside the forest?

For many years of consumption and disposal in the Governor Indigenous Land, garbage received the same fate as food scraps, wood, and natural fibers. It was thrown behind the houses. The villages of the Timbira people are circular, with a patio in the center and radial paths that lead to the houses are placed (Ladeira, 1982). When the families within a house become autonomous, with children and fields, they build houses behind the houses of the older matriarchs (Melo, 2017). Therefore, choosing where to throw the waste is a key issue to ensure the construction of new houses and population growth.

It must be said that not all industrial or natural waste receives the same destination. Artifacts made of feathers and wood that will no longer be used but have a ritualistic value are kept for many years. Objects that have belonged to the same person for a long time are taken to the grave on the day of their burial (Melo, 2017). However, in recent decades, the volume of garbage from the city has increased, and a way of disposing of it is necessary.

The Hawks throw the industrial waste that does not decay into a large hole in the back of the houses. When the hole is full, they burn the waste. What does not deteriorate immediately remains in the hole. Each hole is used for years, but everyone knows that it will not be used forever. If the population is growing, as is the consumption and disposal of garbage in the village, this problem motivates the Gavião to deal with their garbage.

**Figure 2** - Hole where discarded waste is deposited and burned



Source: Produced by the authors

Dealing with waste is not just an issue for the Hawkeye. Liborian (2015) analyzes the presence of such a large amount of chemicals in the bodies of Greenland natives that they could be considered chemical waste. The author will suggest a model approach based on the idea of “miasmas,” theories used to think about the origin of diseases that are considered scattered, non-specific influences on their causes. That is, “miasma provides a material framework for understanding how plastic pollution works in the environments and bodies of which it has become an everyday part” (Liborian, 2015: 147).

In Brazil and on the border with Paraguay, Arisi and Cantero (2016: 381) begin their text on industrialized waste and the experiences of indigenous peoples with the question, “Do indigenous peoples have “problems” with waste?” The text shows how the Matis, in the Amazon rainforest, and the Ava Guarani, in Ciudad del Este, deal with garbage. While the first is trying to address issues with increasing garbage in their villages, the Ava Guarani are finding a way to survive by collecting items from the city’s trash. The authors also present how these peoples develop activities and reflections about garbage suggested by environmental educators, known as the 5 Rs (rethink - refuse - reduce - reuse - recycle).

The way the Gavião people have dealt with their garbage allows a parallel with the authors’ article, presenting activities and reflections about garbage based on the 5Rs approach.

**Rethink.** The concern about garbage within the villages is visible. It is, in a way, general. However, indigenous leaders and teachers have taken the lead, raising this discussion in schools and proposing measures to confront it. For example, the Cultural Environment Gymkhana.

**Refuse.** Chemical pollutants and electronic waste are the target of much concern, but there is no movement to prevent these products from entering Indigenous Land. Cell phones are objects of much interest.

**Reduce.** The Gavião sought through the Plan for Territorial Management of Timbira Lands to reestablish the people’s food sovereignty, precisely to reduce consumption of industrialized food products, consequently

reducing the disposal of plastic inside the villages. Native fruit seedlings were cultivated and distributed to all the villages, seeds, cassava manioc, and equipment were acquired to help in the opening of the fields, as well as 14 flour houses were built with the same objective.

**Reuse.** Many residues are used. Stronger plastic bags remain for years storing personal or household goods. Cans are often used to make cassava graters; after they have been opened and pierced on the reverse side, they are nailed to pieces of wood. Today, bicycles and motorcycles are used until they are completely ruined. The same happens with cell phones, beds, mattresses, fabrics, and household appliances.

**Recycling.** There is no recycling among the Gavião people. But during the Gincana Cultural do Meio Ambiente (Environmental Cultural Gymkhana), held in 2021 and 2022, the garbage collected was taken by truck to the exit of the Governor's Indigenous Land, being deposited in a collection point on Br 277, near the municipality of Amarante do Maranhão. The objective was to remove the garbage that was not produced by the Gavião themselves from their land.

In 2021, thinking about the increase in the accumulation of garbage in the villages, the indigenous teachers and leaders organized an Environment Gymkhana, held at the Indigenous School of Governador Village. The children and youth were divided according to the ceremonial groups they belong to, according to the set of names they receive at birth (Melo, 2017). Adults and elders belonging to each of these same ceremonial groups could assist the younger ones in the tasks. The activities involved traditional knowledge and its relationship with the environment, such as knowledge of their own territory, fauna, flora, and traditional doings. For example, in one of the tasks, the team that returned the fastest to the village courtyard with a bacuri would win a point; in another, the team that first sang a specific song from one of the rituals would be the winner, or the team that first drew buriti straw and wove an artifact would be the champion. In both years, a cleaning task force removed the industrial waste found around the houses and in the village courtyard. A truck took the to the city of Amarante do Maranhão. The competition took place again in 2022, and the proposal was to turn it into an annual event.

The Gavião's concern with garbage, which perhaps the competition best represents, is based on the adoption of a non-indigenous environmental or ecological discourse directed at the issue of garbage within the villages. Environment, recycling, and sustainability are Western categories that do not exist among indigenous peoples. However, ecological discourse is a platform for political transactions between indigenous and non-indigenous people. It has been so for many years in the indigenous movement. The idea of a "natural man" that extends to indigenous peoples, the true son of Mother Earth, the common mother of all living things, feeds into a romantic discourse of naturalistic ontologies about the relationship between humans and nature. Saez (2006: 30) calls the "ecological Indian" this way of thinking of the natural man, the good savage who has not lost the bond with nature and is converted in Western society into a mirror: "muestra nos, vestido de outro, esse Yo que preferíamos ser".

There is a significant difference between Amerindian ontologies and naturalist ontologies about the relationship between humans and nature. The idea that we are all children of the same mother Earth, and therefore brothers and sisters, is opposed to the Amerindian ontogenesis perspective. Indigenous societies spend a lot of time and work in the intense process of body fabrication, which aims to differentiate humans from other living beings that are in constant relationship in this process that begins with birth and only ends with death (Viveiros de Castro, 1996). The hunter Gavião does not stop killing armadillos when the game is abundant because he is concerned about the environmental balance. His concern is *tun jöh pa'hêeh*, the "chief of the armadillos," a type of double (Cesarino, 2010), an image of a body or object that manifests itself outwardly in the absence of the former, appearing to him in the forest and as in an act of revenge, making him "enpanema," i.e., unable to hunt other hunts, make him sick and even lead him to death (Melo, 2019).

Indigenous societies recognize a vital trade that runs through heaven and earth, imposing some kind of order among beings, just as we acknowledge in the ecological interdependence among living beings an order in the relationships among them. The difference of indigenous societies “no estará en la conservación de la naturaleza, sino en su disposición para extender el consumo, simétricamente, a un lado y otro de esa frontera [human x natural] que nosotros hemos trazado (Saez, 2006: 36). As the author states, the ecological discourse finds intellectual constructs in the indigenous world that are equivalent, so we need not dismiss all possibilities for reflection from the “ecological indigenous person.”

We can look even more closely at the garbage of the Gavião. This is because “garbage is not a self-evident object, but a socially constructed category, the result of a separation” (Colombijn, Rial, 2016, p. 20). Certainly, understanding more about what garbage is for Amerindian peoples is a topic that lacks ethnographies and discussion. However, we can point to perspectives that the Gavião have about garbage as categories that guide human actions in view of the agentiality that exists in each form of garbage and its relationship with humans.

For the Gavião, there is no specific word for garbage. When referring to some residue coming from the city, they use the phrase: *cohpe jo’creh pehn ehmpoo quin ehntaa ji*. In a literal translation, this would mean: bad things that come from the white man’s village. The word *amquin* means poison, bad thing, and it is used with other words carrying the idea of poison to the mentioned context.

Many words relating to different kinds of waste, derived from petroleum, are “gaviãonized,” such as *prastico* (plastic). But, some waste gets more attention. Even when discarded, the televisions are called *cohpe carut* (white man’s soul), and the computer is called *cry pex* (intelligent good head).

From our ethnography, we will deal with three categories that the Gavião use to refer to garbage, which formulated in English would be: *poisonous waste*, *dangerous waste*, and *our waste*. Each one of them refers to a type of waste and the impacts they cause on the life of the community.

The *poisonous waste* does not carry the bad thing in itself; that which is harmful to humans appears when it is incinerated and becomes smoke. The black smoke that waste such as tires, plastic, and Styrofoam produce is avoided mainly by children and the elderly. There is some caution when burning these products, but they are burned together with all other waste in the same hole. The biggest concern with poisonous waste is the smoke from burning plastic bags to start small fires. Inside every home, small bonfires are made to cook food or warm the winter days, using plastic as a catalyst for combustion. It is an old practice performed daily by some women for over 50 years.

The *dangerous waste* carries in itself, in the material it is made of, the bad thing. They are shards of glass, usually from alcoholic beverages left in the corners of the village, and canned food of different origins, such as cans of sardines, bean stew, tomato sauce, canned corn, condensed milk, and cans of oil. Pieces of iron, aluminum, and copper wires are also in this classification; they are residues that cause danger. The danger is that children, even adults, cut their feet or hands on this waste, often covered by the bush that grows over it in the villages.

*Our waste* also does not carry in itself its power to impact human life; it manifests itself during its putrefaction, and, unlike the other categories, it carries something positive to all living beings. All waste that originates from the Governor’s Indigenous Land is considered *our waste* and can be reinserted into the very land it came from. The straws of buriti, babassu, carnauba, piassaba, used in handicrafts and to cover houses, the pieces of wood from handicrafts or construction, vines and embiras used in lashings, are thrown in the back of the houses. Many houses have fruit trees in the backyard and small corn and cassava plantations. This type of residue deliberately scattered in this space works as a potent fertilizer. Some of this waste is purposely burned outside the holes to leave the ashes on these pieces of soil for which they have some future interest. The remains of fish and other hunted animals, bones, viscera, and leather, as well as residues of rice, cassava,

flour, fava beans, corn, sweet potato, pumpkin, peanuts, watermelon, banana, buriti, jussara, bacaba, bacuri, guava, mango, and cashew, which are the basis of the Gavião people's diet, serve as food for the chickens, cats, or dogs of each house. These are residues that never accumulate or cause any odor at the back of the houses.

The increase in garbage worries the Gavião people, however, not to the point of creating conflicts among the villagers themselves. They recognize that some families are more concerned about garbage than others, which triggers points of garbage accumulation that, with the winds, spread everywhere. However, the absence of conflict does not hide the imminent danger of increasing garbage and the concern that now surrounds the villages.

## Conclusion

There is little literature in Brazil and Latin America about solid waste management by indigenous populations and even less work on what we could call an indigenous perspective on garbage. But, looking at some of these experiences and conceptions about garbage can create a panorama of this situation in forests and urban villages.

The 60 years of consumption and disposal in the Governor Indigenous Land have accompanied moments of greater or lesser proximity to national society. The closer, the closer to industrial goods and conflicts with city dwellers. The illegal deforestation in the Gavião territory has created an increase in the community's dependence on food consumption goods from the city since this anthropic action impairs hunting, fishing, gathering, and the opening of plantations. With the land demarcated and the gradual access to public policies aimed at indigenous peoples, the Gavião entered a new cycle of consumption that accompanied the process of dispersion and concentration of villages within the territory. This scenario gained strength with government aid from the 2000s on, but by 2020, the increase in degradation and conflicts with city dwellers made it increasingly difficult to live independently and increased the need for industrial goods, especially foodstuffs. This is not a direct relationship, but it intensifies in these moments of proximity.

The Gavião's experiences with waste management in their villages have given them partial control over the situation. Most of the organic waste is still deposited at the back of the houses, often serving as food for dogs, cats, and chickens. Waste that does not easily deteriorate is burned in a large hole at the back of the house.

Garbage is also a problem for the Gavião from a different perspective than ours since it results from a social process of qualification that is different from ours and needs to be investigated. The use of the word *aquim* (bad thing) in sentences that refer to industrial waste makes us think of a dimension of waste agency. This capacity is manifested in the very nature of the waste, as in glass shards, canned goods, and metals classified as hazardous waste. Other times, it is manifested through natural processes subjected to garbage, such as *poisonous waste*, which brings a risk to humans when it burns, like the smoke from burning plastic bags, Styrofoam, and tires. Or, as in the classification of *our waste*, which refers to all the waste produced internally in the Governor Indigenous Land and that can return to the environment, such as food scraps, straws, and wood. In this case, garbage brings positive potentialities to humans since, in putrefaction, it increases the productivity of the soil in the form of natural fertilizer.

If, on the one hand, the increase of garbage inside the villages is an image that reflects the errors of a society based on consumption, on the other hand, the ways these people have dealt with garbage point to practices and perspectives different from those known by educators and environmental managers. The difference here is beneficial; it offers us other ways of thinking and dealing with waste and brings us closer to solving problems that impact both those living in the forests and those in the cities.



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# Public policies for solid waste management and the occupation of areas near water in Manaus and Recife

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## Abstract

This article presents research experiences that examine water and solid waste in two Brazilian capitals: Manaus (AM) and Recife (PE). Contrasts, differences, and intersections between public policies on waste management, sanitation and housing are the points that sew this text together, as well as socio-environmental issues emerging in the ways of life related to water, whether along rivers and streams, tidal areas, or oceans. With converging scenarios – including the dumping of waste in water, and the lack of rights to decent housing – the people who live on the banks of watercourses and flooded areas are held responsible for dumping the waste that overflows onto streets, invading their homes. However, these dwellings receive floods of garbage from all over the city, invading their territories. A multi-sited look at these populations, based on street ethnography, visual registers, and comparative studies, combines with studies that produced in our research network on the anthropology of waste in Latin America and Europe.

**Key words:** Manaus-Recife; Solid waste management; watery regions.

# Políticas públicas de gestão de resíduos e o processo de ocupação de áreas alagadas em Manaus e Recife

## Resumo

Este artigo apresenta experiências de pesquisa entre as águas e os resíduos sólidos de duas capitais brasileiras: Manaus (AM) e Recife (PE). Contrastes, divergências e intersecções sobre políticas públicas de gestão de resíduos, saneamento e habitação são pontos que costuram este texto, além das questões socioambientais emergentes nos modos de vida relacionados às águas fluviais, salobras ou oceânicas. Com cenários convergentes, que incluem o despejo de resíduos nas águas e sem direito à moradia digna, as populações que habitam às margens de cursos d'água e áreas alagadas são responsabilizadas pela deposição do lixo que transborda sobre as vias, invadindo suas casas. Todavia, essas habitações recebem enxurradas de lixo de toda a cidade, sobrepondo-se sobre seus territórios. O olhar multissitiado sobre essas populações, pautado na etnografia de rua, registros visuais e estudo comparativo, soma-se aos estudos que compõem nossa rede de pesquisa sobre Antropologia do Lixo/Resíduos na América Latina e Europa.

**Palavras-chave:** Manaus-Recife; Gestão de Resíduos Sólidos; Áreas Alagadas.

# Public policies for solid waste management and the occupation of areas near water in Manaus and Recife

Camila Garcia Iribarrem, Caroline Soares de Almeida and Márcia Regina Calderipe Farias Rufino

## Introduction

This article<sup>1</sup> is the result of ethnographic research carried out in the realm of the «Anthropologies of Garbage/Solid Waste» network of researchers, which joins people from Brazilian and foreign universities (The Netherlands, Argentina, Uruguay) to build a theoretical and ethnographic framework that allows us to reflect on the subject of «waste» in a comparative way. From the outset, anthropology has used comparative methodologies to think about the particularities and differences established about a single object or category of analysis. As Evans-Pritchard (2021)<sup>2</sup> said at a conference at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences in 1963, at least since Aristotle, theorists from other fields of knowledge have sought comparative configurations that compose the trajectory of thinking in the human sciences. In this sense, through comparative and multi-sited ethnographies (Marcus, 1995) carried out with six eyes, six ears and six hands, we sought what from a Latournian point of view is configured as a socio-technical network (Latour, 2012), to understand how relationships are established between people living in flooded areas and how solid waste management affects housing issues in two Brazilian capitals: Manaus (AM) and Recife (PE).

Both cities are surrounded by large bodies of water, with communities built on stilts known as *palafitas*, which delineate insurgent social contours about different ways of living and inhabiting between, on and with the waters. The socio-environmental repercussions of these ways of life, especially issues of waste disposal and sanitation policies that include specificities related to waters as protagonists of these housing scenarios, are points of encounter and distance that permeate our research, or as proposed by Ingold, our trails of entanglement, in the sense that «it is within such a tangle of interlaced trails, continually ravelling here and unravelling there, that beings grow or ‘issue forth’ along the lines of their relationships» (Ingold, 2011: 71).

In our discussion circles, where the interlacing of waters and solid waste was the guiding focus for a comparative proposal between the two cities and a theme we had been discussing for some time, a structural aspect confronts the focus we highlighted in our observations: the demand for decent housing in these communities. We believe this is a point that can make interesting contributions to the field, beyond the reflections and analyses proposed in comparative categories concerning the method of these studies. It is a result that emerges from the voices we heard about the precariousness these communities are relegated to, driven by exclusionary housing policies and marginalization of these ways of life.

<sup>1</sup> The studies on which this article is based were conducted with support from CNPq, the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development, - Brazil; FACEPE, the Research and Technology Support Foundation of Pernambuco; and FAPEAM, the Research Support Foundation of Amazonas.

<sup>2</sup> In Amazonas, we participated in the Project “Avaliação de Tecnologia Social – O Programa Revolução dos Baldinhos e a replicação da gestão comunitária de resíduos orgânicos em comunidades de Florianópolis (SC) e Iranduba (AM)”, coordinated by Dr. Carmen Rial (UFSC), and financed by CNPq (IRIBARREM, C.; RUFINO, M. C.; ALMEIDA, C. 2020).

This text is composed of two fronts. The first concerns the «social uses of water» (Bastos, 2003)<sup>3</sup>. In this sense, in our individual and collective experiences as researchers in networks and projects<sup>4</sup> that incorporate intersections on the anthropology of waste, in research involving cities such as Florianópolis, Manaus, Recife and Amsterdam, water emerges as a category of analysis for reflection on the circularity and destination of various wastes produced by the processes of human occupation. These are participatory investigations and observations on how, at present, public policies, and relations of ageing between selective solid waste disposal collections and individual initiatives produce a circular movement and a slow but upward trajectory of awareness about the environmental impact of sanitation and the relationship with the social conjuncture observed in these regions. The second front concerns the implementation of waste management policies, and housing policies, and how they affect people living in areas touched by waters. As Colombijn and Rial (2016: 26)<sup>5</sup> discuss from a symbolic perspective, «waste is not a self-evident object, but a socially constructed category», which corroborates what Maria Raquel Passos Lima (2021) observed. For this anthropologist, when triggered, the analytical category «garbage» operates as a moral definition, which should therefore be hidden. «Residue», however, removes the negative meaning of the word garbage.<sup>6</sup> Residues can have other destinations and, obviously, other mediations (Lima, 2021). A residue is not an end [product], it is a state of matter that has the potential to be reinserted into a production chain. The character of dirt, of something polluting, attributed to the perspective of Mary Douglas (1985) is thus re-signified. In this text we address the two symbolic perspectives - «garbage» and «residue» - by activating practices that conceal this material or make it visible (Lima, 2021).

With this, we intend to present some reflections that contribute to an agenda that is currently fundamental: the treatment of solid waste in large Brazilian cities, considering its environmental impact and the improvement of quality of life in urban spaces – at times revealing forms of segregation. This is an essay that highlights established analytical approaches and a first experience of writing at the intersection of themes that we have researched collectively and/or individually. Our observations has us think about our understanding of recycling and the extent to which what exists in Manaus and Recife in terms Social and Environmental Program for the Igarapés of Manaus, linked to the office of the state governor, which In partnership with the participation of civil society and the various sectors involved.began its urban interventions in 2006, encompassing various areas of the city. of the treatment and proper disposal of waste requires the intense participation of its inhabitants.

These peculiar ways of living and inhabiting these areas are therefore often denied by local public policies that seek to homogenize urban landscapes, reconfiguring them in a strategy to produce an ennobled city, in which «modernization is symbolized by cleanliness and vice versa» (Colombijn; Rial 2016: 26). In<sup>7</sup> this case, low-income populations living in areas considered environmentally fragile are removed to support urban requalification and resolve socio-environmental problems (Oliveira 2003).<sup>8</sup>

3 Residue is the word used in Brazilian law, as in the “Política Nacional de Resíduos Sólidos” [National Solid Waste Policy]. In English, these laws usually use the word “waste”, as in the “Municipal Waste Management Association” of the US Conference of Mayors. The English version of this article uses the word “waste”.

4 Contrary to the classic concept from Robert Park (1967), in Brazil, urban peripheries are characterized more by a symbolic than geographic distance from a city center.

5 The forums are always held on the last Friday of the month, in the auditorium of the Recife Urbanization Authority (URB).

6 Igarapé is a regional term for creeks, streams, tributaries, or small arms of rivers that cross areas of cities and territories in the Amazon.

7 It is important to note that these data are from the 2010 census, given that the COVID-10 pandemic and negligence by the Bolsonaro government delayed the 2020 census.

8 Social and Environmental Program for the Igarapés of Manaus, linked to the office of the state governor, which began its urban interventions in 2006, encompassing various areas of the city.

Considering this theoretical framework and the experience of working in a network, the next step was to observe municipal management of solid residues in peripheral <sup>9</sup> locations bordering rivers and mangroves - as well as the scope of other urban sanitation services - and the housing policies adopted to mitigate the problems generated by the occupation of housing in areas subject to flooding. Field trips were therefore made to locations in Manaus; including Educandos, Polo Industrial de Manaus, Japiim, Parque do Mindu, the central waterfront and Selective Collection Points; and in Recife, including Afogados, the central region, and the Prezeis<sup>10</sup> forums and the 1st International Solid Residues Conference (CIRSOL). These incursions took place between December 2021 and April 2023. Preference was given to street ethnography, a method advocated by Cornelia Eckert and Ana Luiza Rocha (2013), which allows for the exploration of broader areas through the idea of flânerie. They affirm:

Street ethnography is an adherence to the classical method of anthropology, but more than this affiliation, it is a dialog with new interpretative times in anthropology in its critical paradigms. Thus, alterity here is not located in a strange space, nor is it the distanced Other. The challenge is to let ourselves flow reflexively, and why not in body and spirit, in the city. Our provocation to the reader is to let ourselves be guided by conceptual shifts led by the images that shape the city we look at, listen to and interact with. [...] The street, in ethnographic exercises, appears to us as a space-time arrangement where social life takes place in its most diverse forms (Eckert; Rocha 2013: 13).

It also helps us think about the precautions that should be taken with the use of images considering the production of divergent meanings, as well as other temporalities than those defended and presented by the public administrators of the two cities related to waste management models, sustainability and consumption standards. All of this reveals the great social inequality in which these municipalities are inserted. We therefore use two types of language: writing, through bibliographical references and ethnographic experiences from field observations in Manaus and Recife; and images. In this sense, we were inspired by Achutti (1997), an anthropologist and photographer who developed the concept of photoethnography in a study carried out with women who pick waste in the Vila Dique neighborhood of Porto Alegre. For Achutti, images emerge as «an autonomous narrative resource with the function of converging meanings and information about a given social situation» (Achutti, 1997:13). Bateson and Mead (1942) also not only consider the complex relationship between written texts and images, but the way photographs are presented – and their systematic organization when published. This corroborates Etienne Samain's (2000) observation about the classic study *Balinese Character*, in which photos are sometimes sequential, sometimes structural. Samain, alongside André Alves in *Os argonautas do mangue* (2004), used a similar resource for the arrangement of images. On the relationship between text and photographs in the work of Bateson and Mead, Samain affirms:

An innovative experiment, but one that does not intend to break with anthropological tradition. This leads Margaret Mead to sign, immediately after this «introduction», 48 other pages of other texts, this time referring to the contextualization of the hundred photographs organized around ten chosen themes. In reality, this long «note» on Balinese character represents more than the (necessary) effort to ambient the reader for what they are about to discover and go through, verbally and visually. At the same time, it expresses what Margaret Mead will always advocate: caution as much as affirmation of the signifying (and significant) power of photography in the field of human sciences. In other words, these 48 written pages respond to a double imperative: on the one hand, the defense of the photograph's claim to be able to express something that text does not know and will never know

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<sup>9</sup> There are currently 67 Zeis (Zones of Social Interest) type 1, which are spontaneous occupations such as slums, and seven Zeis type 2, underutilized housing or vacant land that can receive residences and land regularization.

<sup>10</sup> In partnership with the participation of civil society and the various sectors involved.



how to achieve and, on the other, the need to confess that, in the absence of a commentary, the future «reading» of the photographs will remain fragile or, at least, problematic (Samain 2000: 71).

We are obviously considering the Brazilian anthropologist's warning about the dominance of writing in relation to the visual. Here we highlight the «polysemic» and «voluble» character of the «awakening of meanings that are not necessarily codified (i.e. defined by the codes of graphic reason)» (Samain, 2000: 87). Furthermore, still drawing on Samain (2012), we consider the capacity for ideation that images give rise to, in the same way that the composition chosen for their presentation also does.

Another relevant aspect that deserves to be explained in this introduction concerns the fieldwork in Manaus. The methodological approach of the research sought to «follow the garbage», something similar to the strategy employed by Maria Raquel Passos de Lima during her doctoral research with waste pickers in Jardim Gramacho published in *O avesso do lixo* (2021). Maria Raquel chose as her theoretical tool the precepts of Arjun Appadurai (2008) - «Follow the things themselves» - and Alfred Gell (1991) - attributing agency to the object. Thus, the object «garbage» was observed through its collection at various points in the city, such as on the waterfront, along<sup>11</sup> the igarapés, in the center or downtown neighborhoods and at sites for collecting separated recyclable waste in institutional actions by the Manaus municipal government.

### **A bit about urban contexts and housing policies in the two cities**

In terms of population,<sup>12</sup> Manaus has around 2.25 million inhabitants, while Recife has 1.66 million. Despite having a smaller population, the city in Pernambuco has a higher demographic density, at around 7,604.2 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>, making it the fourth highest among Brazilian capitals. The city in Amazonas has 197.9 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>. A comparison of the population areas and their demographic formation suggest divergences in the conjuncture of their urban-geographic formations. But the peripheral realities of residences bordering waters, or that emerge from waterways and establish particular ways of life on the water's edge, meant that our starting point was found in the *palafitas* [stilt houses] and other modes of occupation in flooded areas common to both cities.

Precarious housing is historically associated with processes of urban transformation through spatial redistribution that displaces populations from areas that have come to be valued over time. Teresa Caldeira (2000) calls these processes «Brazilian methods of segregation».<sup>13</sup>:

Segregation - both social and spatial - is an important characteristic of cities. The rules that organize urban space are basically patterns of social differentiation and separation. These rules vary culturally and historically, reveal the principles that structure public life and indicate how social groups interrelate in the city space (Caldeira, 2000: 211).

This is true in Manaus and Recife, the capital cities of Amazonas and Pernambuco, when residents from the lower/subaltern classes began to settle in the most inhospitable parts of these cities, such as the mangroves and rivers. The ways of living on the water generate a differentiated relationship between the people who live there and the environment - a relationship that is not always understood by the government when it implements public policies.

The removal of the population from the central area of Manaus began at the end of the nineteenth century, when there was the first boom in urbanization brought about by the accumulation of capital, mainly from the production and export of latex (Dias, 2007). The transformation carried out in the central area of the

<sup>11</sup> The PNRS has a total of 15 objectives.

<sup>12</sup> The shared responsibility for the life cycle of a product involves holding producers and not just consumer's responsible.

city by Governor Eduardo Ribeiro prioritized landfilling *igarapés*, the construction of public buildings, road infrastructure, as well as sanitary projects, lighting, and public cleaning, as the author notes. The ideology of modernity, civilization and progress led to the removal of impoverished and despised populations who lived in houses on the banks of *igarapés*, which were then landfilled. Economic growth and the aim of making the city a place befitting the elite that was being formed, brought about a sanitary vision based on great works, such as imposing buildings, boulevards, and bridges. From 1912 onwards, with the fall of rubber production, the «city of Fausto» became an illusion (Dias, 2007; Oliveira and Schor, 2008). As a result, the different appropriations of the city became evident:

Then the city of the defeated, of contradictions and conflicts comes to the fore, and the spatialities of the grottos emerge, on the other side of the *igarapés* and on the other side of the river, with the Educandos, Curre, Plano Inclinado, Matinha, São Raimundo, Morro da Liberdade neighborhoods emerging, where residents seek to be the new subjects of the production of urban space. For these people, the city's crisis has a different dimension, because it doesn't fit into the determinations of the extractivist elite or those of the state (Oliveira e Schor, 2008: 68).

In his novel *Dois Irmãos (The Brothers)*, Milton Hatoum tells the story of a family of Lebanese origin and the quarrel between twin brothers in the capital of Amazonas in the mid-20th century. He describes the urban transformations that led to segregation models in the city, linked to forms of housing built over water.

Halim's life had improved in the post-war years. He sold a bit of everything to the residents of Educandos, one of the most populous neighborhoods in Manaus, which had grown considerably with the arrival of rubber soldiers from the farthest rivers of the Amazon. With the end of the war, they migrated to Manaus, where they built stilt houses on the banks of the *igarapés*, on the banks and in the clearings of the city. Manaus grew like this: in the tumult of the first to arrive (Hatoum, 2006: n.p.).

Between the central area and the Educandos neighborhood was the floating city: a group of buildings that floated on the Rio Negro. The floating houses represented another Manaus. A residential area, with small businesses, completely different from today's landscape, but which connected almost harmoniously with the city, according to Hatoum. The historian Barata Souza affirmed:

The «floating city» represented a model of occupation of river spaces that grew in Manaus from the end of the 1950s onwards, when several of the cultural meanings specific to a city began to be experienced on the city's urban waters, namely on the southern banks of the Rio Negro, the Centro [downtown], the «front of the city» and on the *igarapés* that rise from the river into Manaus. Among these meanings stands out the densification of floating houses, the population increase and commercial dynamism, which in addition to reshaping the place, began to determine new forms of sociability rooted in a daily life of their own (Barata Souza, 2016: 118).

Floating houses can now be found in communities around Manaus and rarely on its waterfront. Some of the reports presented by the author state that since the 1960s, with urban reforms and a policy to make the floating city extinct, some of the families moved to houses on stilts (Barata Souza, 2016). Although they are different types of construction, both floating and stilt houses share complex techniques for working with wood in constructions built to withstand the aquatic environment, and are exponents of the disorganized urban expansion that afflicted Manaus during the 20th century. Life lived on the water generates a different relationship between people and the river.

In the wetlands of Manaus, Rufino (2017) observes the plurality of perspectives on their uses and the logics of occupation as visions that overlap, intersect and, in certain aspects, dialog. The author states that the waters are disputed by different projects that struggle to assert their interests and a public image of the city that

projects it globally. In this sense, a large-scale project like Prosamim<sup>13</sup> brought significant transformations to urban life, in that it removed some of the residents from the igarapés and riverbanks, moving them to housing developments in the periphery of the city (Meneguini, 2012). As Junior and Nogueira (2011) point out, when they analyze the landfills of the igarapés over more than a hundred years, the model for intervention of this program is characterized by the landfilling and canalization of igarapés, continuing processes that began in Manaus in the late 19th century, altering the watercourses and distancing them from the population, in environmental and cultural terms.

As Iribarrem and Rufino (2020: 13) point out, the specificity of the set of floating dwellings and stilt houses that persist in urban spaces «constitute forms of resistance and insurgency in the ways of living and inhabiting that go against a sanitary logic» that is still in force in the large projects underway in Manaus that produce cemented canals, asphalted streets, open sewers.

The central regions of Recife also underwent urban reforms that pushed the low-income populations who lived there into *mocambos* [shacks] and *palafitas* in increasingly peripheral and inhospitable areas. This was very similar to the pattern of segregation that affected other parts of the country (Caldeira 2000). Rogério Proença Leite (2001; 2006),<sup>14</sup> for example, likens these reforms in the capital of Pernambuco to the application of the “bota abaixo” [tear it down] policy in Rio de Janeiro, which marked the government of Pereira Passos in the early twentieth century. His research focuses on the changes in the Recife neighborhood, a central and port area that underwent a major gentrification process during the 1990s.

It is worth noting that the urban occupation of the region long predates the Manauara occupation, which began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Recife was the port of Olinda. Gilberto Freyre (2003) used the term “Olinda-Recife area”, a name created by sociologist Donald Pierson to spatially designate the patriarchal-slave relationship established by the sugarcane plantation system in northeastern Brazil. Thus, Olinda served as the political-administrative region of the sugar mills, while Recife was the outlet for production. The city, now the capital of Pernambuco, was originally made up of islands and was expanded through the construction of bridges and landfilling processes during the various urban reforms (Bezerra, Melo, 2014).

The first of these reforms took place during the Dutch domination (1630-1654), in the areas where the central neighborhoods of Recife Antigo, Boa Vista, São José and Santo Antônio are located – the latter two arising, in part, from landfills on the Capibaribe and Beberibe rivers (Bezerra, Melo, 2014; Pacheco de Souza, 2021). We highlight that part of the Através da Lei Estadual Nº 4457 DE 12/04/2017. Through State Law No. 4457 OF 04/12/2017. landfilling of the São José neighborhood occurred not only through planned actions at different times in history, but also through the occupation of areas subject to flooding, in the “spontaneous construction of mansions and *mocambos*” (Pacheco de Souza, 2021: 18).

Another factor that contributed to the degradation of the Capibaribe River was the expansion and intensification of the occupation of its banks, which began at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the migration process from the countryside to the city. The migrant population, unable to access urban land, settled in the mangrove and wetland areas, less valuable land, building their *mocambos* there, using fishing as a means of subsistence (Bezerra, Melo, 2014: 99).

13 The Relatório Luz 2021 [The Light 2021 Report] involved different civil society organizations to assess the progress of government plans to comply with the UN 2030 Agenda. For more information: AGÊNCIA CÂMARA DE NOTÍCIAS. The report indicates that Brazil did not advance in any of the UN's 169 sustainable development goals. Available at: <https://www.camara.leg.br/noticias/784354-relatorio-aponta-que-o-brasil-nao-avancou-em-nenhuma-das-169-metas-de-desenvolvimento-sustentavel-da-onu/>. Accessed: 20 November 2022.

14 According to the map provided by the Programa Lixão Zero, most of the 33.1% of the municipalities without information are in the North and Northeast (Brasil, 2019:35).

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the tourist potential began to be exploited by the proliferation of bars and commercial establishments opened after the restoration of the buildings in the region. According to the author, the first trace of post-gentrification segregation in the region was the collection of waste and urban cleaning of the Rua do Bom Jesus, which was different from the rest. In fact, there are reports that consider what is now the capital of the state of Pernambuco to be the first Brazilian city to have a landfill, built in the 17th century during the Dutch occupation (Rezende, Heller, 2008).

On the other hand, Recife has a national milestone in terms of urban occupation and land regularization with the creation of the Plan for the Regulation of Special Zones of Social Interest (PREZEIS), which was launched in 1987 and has served as a model for other Brazilian cities. It consists of a participatory tool aimed at planning and implementing urban policies. All decisions are taken by vote of representatives from each of the Zeis<sup>15</sup> in the forums. Most of these areas have houses in areas touched by waters - between rivers and mangroves.

Data from the National Household Sample Survey (PNAD/IBGE), collected in 2021, shows that the Greater Recife region has the highest percentage of people living in extreme poverty among all the country's metropolitan regions (Salata, Gomes, 2022),<sup>16</sup> with 39% of the local population living in extreme poverty - which is when the per capita income in the household is less than R\$465.00 (1/4 of the Minimum Wage at the time). Thus, the capital of Pernambuco is characterized by social inequality stamped on the urban landscape of a city that is verticalizing in condominiums, while simultaneously maintaining the Zeis. It should be noted that the same profusion of river waters that places Manaus at the confluence of two major Amazonian rivers: the Amazon River and the Negro River, also points to Recife as a coastal capital intersected by rivers - the Capibaribe, Beberibe and Tejiçó - with incursions of ocean tides and dense mangrove formations. In both cities, tangles of life are woven along the water's edge, whether fresh or salty, with Amazonian floods or ocean storms invading portions of land. The contours of tides and floods directly influence the ways of life, spatiality, and urban formation of the two cities, influenced by the distinct cultural formations that have emerged at these points that are equidistant to the waters.

## Public Waste Management Policies

The National Solid Waste Policy (PNRS), created in 2010, established instruments and guidelines for the preparation of integrated solid waste management plans by Brazilian states and municipalities,<sup>17</sup> which must consider local peculiarities, including coastal and riverside areas. Its objectives<sup>18</sup> also include encouraging environmental education and raising awareness among the population, in an effort to change behavior and promote good environmental practices (Brasil 2010). The document also establishes shared responsibility<sup>19</sup> for discarded waste and sets deadlines for states and municipalities to meet the targets, and was reinforced by the commitment signed in the United Nations 2030 Agenda. However, a report<sup>20</sup> presented in the Chamber of

15 Através da Lei Estadual Nº 4457 DE 12/04/2017. Through State Law No. 4457 OF 04/12/2017.

16 The authors define collection routes as «micro-areas that comprise neighborhoods, partially or totally, through which pass collection trucks that carry out urban collection and cleaning» (Silva et al., 2020: 823).

17 Its area is estimated at 66 hectares and it is located at km 19 of the AM-010 highway, which links the capital to the municipalities of Rio Preto da Eva and Itacoatiara, with a length of 265 km. According to information from the Secretariat, the landfill has an environmental operating license from the Environmental Protection Institute of the State of Amazonas - IPAAM.

18 This is research carried out by Camila Iribarrem and Márcia Calderipe within the scope of INCT Brasil Plural, an institute with general offices and coordination at the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) and the project «Evaluation of Social Technology - The Revolution of the Buckets Program and the replication of community management of organic waste in communities in Florianópolis (SC) and Iranduba (AM)», linked to NAVI/UFSC.

19 The waters of the igarapé's that cut through the city discharge into the Rio Negro, which, due to its volume of water, acts as a self-drainage system (Machado et al., 2019).

20 This services costs about R\$50,00.

Deputies in 2021 showed that of the 169 targets in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG/UN), 54.4% are retroceding, 16% are stagnant, 12.4% are threatened and 7.7% show insufficient progress. These are some of the consequences of the neoliberal policies adopted over the last four years under the Bolsonaro government. It is also important to mention that the evaluations and analyses provided for in the «social control» objective of the National Solid Waste Policy, if carried out, were not presented to civil society during the period - given the difficulties in finding data for the last four years on federal government portals.

In addition, a recently published audit by the Comptroller General of the Union (CGU) analyzed the accounts of the Ministry of the Environment (MMA) over a two-year period and revealed that only 7.11% of the available budget funds were actually used during the period analyzed (Brasil, 2022). The «Lixão Zero» [No Garbage Dumps] program (Brazil, 2019), whose action plan only includes short-term goals, was not able to reduce the number of clandestine garbage dumps across the country. According to the CGU, the number of dumps and controlled landfills increased in 2020 – there are no MMA records for the situation in 2021 and 2022. The results of the program to remove solid residues from waters also fell far short of demand.

In another assessment, this one of water management between 2018 and 2022, the CGU's Federal Secretariat for Internal Control (Brasil, 2022) found that municipalities in Brazil's Northeast and North regions were less involved in collecting data<sup>21</sup> that had an impact on the Diagnoses of Urban Solid Waste Management and Urban Stormwater Drainage and Management. The regions are also highlighted in the document launching the National No Garbage Dumps Program (Brasil, 2019):

According to the National Basic Sanitation Plan (PLANSAB, 2010), in both relative and absolute terms, the Northeast is the region in Brazil with the most precarious sanitation conditions in terms of household waste collection coverage and the North is responsible for the second highest number of residents who throw their waste into water bodies, highlighting the shortcomings in these regions (Brasil, 2019).

It should be noted that, although the program was launched in 2019, the data for the North and Northeast regions corresponds to a study carried out during the Lula administration, which gave rise to the National Basic Sanitation Plan in 2010. Therefore, there is an information gap of at least a decade. The No Garbage Dump Program website also does not present management reports. The «data blackout», as this practice of the Bolsonaro government was dubbed by the press, was aggravated by the delay in conducting the demographic census.

Since the launch of the National Solid Residue Plan, Brazilian states and municipalities have been in the process of implementing waste management plans and strategies to mitigate the impacts caused by the consumption and disposal of products in keeping with the 2010 law. Pernambuco approved its state policy in the same year. The state of Amazonas, in 2017.<sup>22</sup> Data from the Pernambuco State Government's Department of Cities a year after the launch of the national plan showed that 84% of household waste in the Recife Metropolitan Region (RMR) was destined for controlled and sanitary landfills. In 2016,

Conventional waste collection is predominant in the city, with a coverage rate of around 100%. However, selective collection of the dry recyclable fraction is limited, corresponding to 0.5% of Sectorization of the solid household waste collection routes by multivariate techniques in 2016, and there is no differentiated collection for household organic waste (Silva et al., 2020: 822-823).<sup>23</sup>

21 Secretaria Municipal de Limpeza Pública [Municipal Secretariat for Public Cleaning].

22 In addition to this collection, merchants downtown are informed about collection points for residue. We were not able to examine this specific situation, but intend to in the future.

23 The term *bodozal* portrays an emic category. According to Vieira Souza; Silva Souza (2020: 5), «it is derived from the name of the acaribodó fish that inhabits and breeds in the muddy bottoms of Amazonian lakes. The word is used pejoratively to refer to occupations on the beds of igarapés».

The discrepancy between collection coverage – selective and ordinary waste – has been a challenge for the current administration. The Recife municipal government is responsible for planning and managing organic solid waste in the city through the *Autarquia de Manutenção e Limpeza do Recife (EMLURB)* [The Recife Cleaning and Maintenance Authority]. Collections are carried out regularly. In 2014, the municipality, through EMLURB, launched the *EcoRecife* project, which sought to bring together:

all the public policies and urban cleaning equipment that operate in the city, as well as the environmental education actions undertaken by the municipality, seeking to improve household collection, encourage the correct disposal of recycled waste and launch the *Ecoestations* project, which provides auxiliary equipment for receiving waste (Prefeitura do Recife, 2014).

The creation of the project is part of the *Metropolitan Solid Residue Plan (PMRS)* drawn up jointly with the fourteen municipalities that make up the Recife Metropolitan Region in 2013 - and in line with the national, state and Metropolitan Solid Residue Plans.

In July 2020, the Metropolitan Solid Residue Plan was reinforced with the launch of the *Recycle More* program by Recife’s Urban Innovation Secretariat in July 2020. So far the services have been maintained by the new municipal administration.

On the other hand, the project advocated by the Recife Municipal Government involves a major urban overhaul which, in a way, has been carried out since October 2022 with the launch of *Recife Limpa*. However, what has been implemented so far doesn’t seem to integrate the center and the peripheries, given Vice Mayor Isabella Roldão’s discourse focused on the middle and upper classes and the lack of coverage of the initiatives pointed out by Mayor João Campos in the total area corresponding to the city.

A case study on the sectoral model of solid residue collection routes in Recife (Silva et al., 2020) revealed that household and per capita income are correlated with per capita waste generation. The research analyzed 31 Household Solid Waste (HSW) collection routes<sup>24</sup> used by the company responsible for the service in 2013, which covered 30% of the city’s total population. The assessment considered the correlation between population, income, generation and gravimetric composition of the waste collected. The results led to the classification - according to the table below - of this sectorization into two groups (A and B) and five subgroups (A1, A2, B1, B2 and B3), where A is related to the lower and lower-middle classes, in which the areas covered include the *Afogados* and central communities observed in this study, and B, to the upper (B1), and middle classes (B2) and commerce (B3).

**Table 1** – Summary of the characteristics of the subgroups by similarity

G	SG	Rotas	POP	DD	CE	RMD	RMPC	GR	GRPC	RE	PU
A	A1	10	16.459	164,26	Baixa	1.046,50	318,68	255,50	0,54	43,26	32,77
	A2	7	23.830	224,31	Baixa	587,84	169,59	301,62	0,44	36,21	37,41
B	B1	6	9.565	176,28	Alta	5.490,41	1.907,56	249,40	0,89	42,54	36,69
	B2	7	9.024	129,92	Média	2.165,05	737,37	249,76	0,99	41,36	37,64
	B3	1	3.926	53,53	Média	2.146,67	901,10	373,95	3,17	45,56	43,43

Groups: Subgroups; Routes; POP population; DD demographic density (pop ha.) CE economic class, RMD Avg. household income (R\$ month); RMPC monthly per capita income; GR avg. generation of residues per month (ton. month); GRPC: per capita generation of residues (kg. person day); RE recyclables; PU. Perishables)

<sup>24</sup> Bags made of polypropylene to imitate natural raffia or palm fiber. The bags are recyclable or reused as raw material (Moreira, 2019).

Thus, as household/per capita income increases, more solid waste - including recyclables, perishables and others - is generated per person. The study concludes that this correlation should be used as an auxiliary tool in the construction of public waste management policies, with regard to «proposing sectoral solid waste models that consider the socio-economic particularities of the areas studied» (Silva et al., 2020: 821). This panorama suggests that greater access to the consumption of goods and products, as well as the waste of perishable products, is associated with the wealthier sections of the population and, consequently, with the generation of waste - which can be seen in the gravimetric composition of the material collected. With the exception of sub-group B3, which is linked to a commercial area (large generators), the difference in per capita waste generation (GRPC) between the other sub-groups is over 55%.

In Manaus, the Municipal Urban Sanitation Department (SEMULSP) is responsible for the collection, transportation, and disposal of solid waste and for public cleaning services. The former is an outsourced service, while public cleaning services are carried out partly by the secretariat and by contracted companies.

The city has the «Manaus Solid Waste Landfill»<sup>25</sup> which receives solid waste from household collection. According to SEMULSP's Activity Report - 2021, solid waste made up 67.85% of the materials collected in Manaus in that year, totaling 567,842 tons, a daily average of 1,555.7 tons, and is the main form of targeting and treatment of the collection carried out in the city. Other significant collections are mechanical removal, manual removal, and pruning. Mechanical removal, which refers to waste removed by cleaning crews in neighborhoods, igarapés or public thoroughfares, represented 13.66% of the waste collected in 2021. Manual removal, when collection by truck is impractical, especially in alleys and areas that are difficult to access, accounted for 15.70%. The two add up to 29.36% and, if we consider the percentage collected in household collections, 97.21% of solid waste is sent to the municipal landfill.

In addition to landfilling solid waste, there are two other ways of disposing of it at the municipal landfill: recycling, by sending materials to waste pickers' sheds, which represents 2.2% in 2021; and the production of organic compost carried out by the Composting Plant, located at the landfill. The aim of the plant is to reduce organic waste in the landfill and provide organic compost for public squares, schools, plant nurseries, etc. It preferably uses material collected through pruning collection (SEMULSP, 2021).<sup>26</sup>

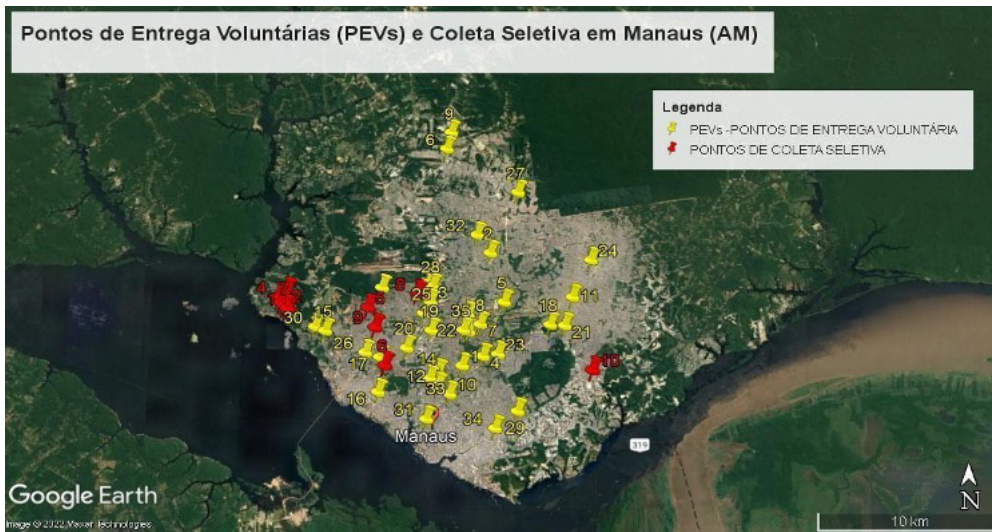
In November 2011, the Manaus municipal government approved Decree No. 1.349, the Manaus Municipal Solid Waste Master Plan - PDRS, also in line with the National Solid Waste Management Plan and Federal Law No. 11.445/2007, which establishes national guidelines for basic sanitation, including solid waste.

With regard to institutional action on selective collection or the separation of waste that has potential for recycling, the current municipal administration of Manaus, which took office in 2021, modified this in 2022. In 2021, selective collection corresponded to only 1.47% of total collection, totaling 12,320 tons per year and 40.1 tons per day. The selective collection method consisted of using a truck to collect separated waste (plastics, metals, paper, glass) from residents in certain neighborhoods in the city. According to information on the official website of the Municipal Department of Public Cleaning (2016), eight neighborhoods were served, with 60 collection points, from Monday to Friday. However, it should be reiterated that the dissemination and implementation of this practice was incipient and little recognized among the city's inhabitants, and it gave priority to only a few neighborhoods.

25 LIXO NÃO VIDA SIM: [NO TO GARBAGE - YES TO LIFE] Social movement in the municipality of Iranduba (AM), in the metropolitan region of Manaus that opposes the installation of a giant private landfill in an area of Amazonian forest located at kilometer nineteen on the interstate highway AM 070.

26 Available at: <https://amazonasatual.com.br/as-mortes-em-manaus-com-as-chuvas-e-a-falta-de-politica-urbana/>. Accessed 04/05/2023.

**Figure 1** - Voluntary Delivery Points (PEVs) and Selective Collection in Manaus (AM) - Google Earth/ SEMULSP - Manaus municipal government.



Currently, the structure of selective waste collection has been transformed, and this service is maintained with institutional trucks only for condominiums located in the Ponta Negra neighborhood, on the west side of the city, a region that concentrates much of the capital's economically privileged elite. Only three public schools are served by this type of collection, the Maria do Céu Municipal Children's Education Center in the Planalto neighborhood, the Raquel de Queiroz Municipal Children's Education Center in the Paz neighborhood and the Terezinha Almeida Silva State School in the Alvorada 2 neighborhood, regions adjacent to the Ponta Negra neighborhood, even though their structural characteristics differ in terms of economic privilege and income concentration. The points that include selective collection are marked in red, where there is a significant agglomeration, as can be seen in the satellite image that shows the areas favored by selective collection.

As of 2022, Semulsp has created 36 Voluntary Collection Points (PEVs), 35 of which are intentionally located at retailers and wholesalers of food and products in general, such as medium and large supermarkets in different areas of the capital, although most of them are concentrated in the central-southern areas of the capital, in neighborhoods that serve both the economic elite and the local middle- and low-income populations. These voluntary drop-off points consist of placing a cart, of approximately 1.5m<sup>2</sup>, with a written inscription on the box highlighting conscious disposal and selective collection.

In this way, the general population can leave materials that have already been previously sorted, such as plastics, glass, paper, and metals. These materials are collected daily by two outsourced companies, Tumpex and Marquise, which distribute them among fifteen cooperatives and associations of waste pickers, according to data provided by CEDOLP (2022). According to a technical report that included the first six months of operation of the PEVs in 2022, a total of 321.47 tons of materials were collected for recycling (CEDOLP, 2022).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> This study is funded by the Research Support Foundation of the State of Pernambuco (FACEPE/PDCR) and the National Research Council (CNPq), as a DCR grant. It corresponds to the initial aspects of Caroline Almeida's current post-doctoral research in the Graduate Program in Anthropology at the University of Pernambuco, entitled «Popular experiences in waste management and the UN 2030 Agenda: perspectives and partnerships between Social Technologies and the UN 2030 Agenda».



## Manaus over the Waters

In Manaus, over the last ten years, we have observed the general situation of the city and especially of its urban waters in relation to occupation, sanitary conditions and solid waste.<sup>28</sup> The encounter between these studies, the growing dialogues with the anthropology of garbage research network and the intersections that permeate this problematic in relation to solid waste and socio-environmental issues, led us to the situation permeated by waters, above which are constructed dwellings that densely accumulate on the banks of the Negro and Amazonas rivers, between their tributaries, known in the regional as *igarapés*. The waterways cut through this area of central Amazonia where the capital of Amazonas is located, establishing the structure of its urban fabric.

The waters in Manaus are divided into four watersheds, two of which are entirely urbanized, São Raimundo and Educandos, and the other two only partially urbanized, Puraquequara and Tarumã, according to Ferreira et al. (2012: 534). The authors distinguish the region where the city is located as areas of *várzea* (floodplains) and solid ground, adaptable to the regimes of flooding and ebbing characteristic of the Amazon forest. In terms of Manaus' urban expansion, Ferreira et al. (2012) note that the city spread out horizontally from the central metropolitan region, towards the north, east and west, limited by natural barriers – the Negro, Amazonas and Tarumã rivers – and public areas, such as the Adolpho Ducke Forest Reserve and the lands of the Brazilian Army.

The urban contour reveals this specificity through the fluidity of its waters, which establish the borders of its land portions and are a marker of the city's socio-cultural constitution. Lyrics by Celso Braga and Osmar Oliveira, from the regionalist musical group *Raízes Caboclas*, portray this poetic ontology of the waters and ways of life that evoke a permeable conjuncture of human relations among the waters:

Brown Amazonas, your sacred waters, are beautiful roads, fairy tales, oh my sweet river...The canoe that passes by, the flight of the heron, the seagulls singing in you leave the taste of love...Ehh the *caboclo* dreaming, and then casting away his sad sorrow... In this poem of bubbles, which resonates in the leaves of the beautiful forest of my river-sea... In this beautiful flow, my infinite desire to plant my cry in the waves of the sea... (Braga; Oliveira, 1992)

The poetics that we hear in the music and idyllic stories of leisure and proximity to the waters told by the city's older residents has been transformed into the sad landscape we see with an excessive volume of waste in public spaces, in poorly maintained garbage cans and especially in the conditions of the *igarapés*. On these waterways spread throughout the city, the houses built on the slopes and banks form a non-linear layout, divided into alleys where only pedestrians can circulate, where garbage accumulates in the passageways and in the waters below and between the houses. The situation is no different on the Rio Negro, which flows through the city and is impacted by garbage that «comes from everywhere». The river, possibly because it has a greater flow of water,<sup>29</sup> hides some of this waste, while also circulating it, until it reaches the sea, for example.

During our research we have observed different areas of *igarapés* in the Educandos watershed (Rufino, 2017; Iribarrem and Rufino, 2020). These places are characterized by dense occupation and for most of the year have stagnant water highly polluted by waste discarded by companies and the population. When walking through its alleys, especially during the dry season, we notice an extremely strong odor and lots of garbage accumulated in the water.

<sup>28</sup> The «Documenting» workshop took place during the 6th Environmental Film Festival of Recife, from November 29 to December 7, and was taught by documentary filmmaker Marlom Meirelles (2021).

<sup>29</sup> Afogados is a heterogeneous neighborhood on the west side of Recife, 4.5 kilometers from Marco Zero. It has a population of around 36,200 inhabitants in an area of 3.69 km<sup>2</sup>, bathed by mangroves and the Tejipló and Capibaribe rivers. It has four Special Interest Zones (Zeis): Afogados, Vila do Siri, Mangueira (part) and Mustardinha.

In the neighborhood of Educandos, along a small fragment of the igarapé, we conducted our observation at the beginning of the dry season and saw a huge amount of garbage under the houses, bridges and in the surrounding area. Residents are unable to do the cleaning that had been the job of the city government. The option is to do it themselves, which is risky and dangerous, or to hire someone else to do it.

With regard to removing garbage from homes, there are difficulties due to the topography of the site, as the houses on the igarapé were built at a level lower than the avenues that surround them and residents have to climb up to take their garbage to the location where urban collection takes place. Given the difficulty of doing this, many bags of garbage are seen along the alleys, with a high risk of ending up in the water. Residents usually pay someone to carry their waste uphill, depositing it at the intersection of a street that has no suitable place to store it until the collection truck passes by.

Other sites where we conducted observation were the Sharp igarapé and Avenida Manaus 2000, located in the Armando Mendes and Japiim neighborhoods respectively, areas in the city's industrial zone. Houses in both locations had been removed by the PROSAMIM program, but there has been new occupation of the banks and beds of the igarapés. Although there are differences in the topography of these igarapés, we observed in both solid waste accumulating on the banks, stuck in trees and bushes, and along their courses. There is also what the Manaus municipal government calls *lixearas viciadas* [literally addicted garbage receptacles], which receive waste that is poorly packaged and thus allow it to spread onto the dry land and into the water.

These observations instigated us to return to the field in the igarapés of Manaus and analyze the institutional strategies that have been adopted to dispose of urban waste. Our effort to «follow the garbage» through a street ethnography began with interlocution with the institution responsible for garbage collection and public cleaning in the municipality, SEMULSP.<sup>30</sup> We contacted the Special Commission for Dissemination and Guidance of Public Cleaning Policy (CEDOLP), and the institutional agents and administrators of the sector, who explained to us the institutional action of the secretariat, the implementation of new organization methods and waste collection practices, selective or not, in addition to the socio-environmental actions proposed by the current institutional management. The civil servants interviewed referred us to their colleagues who work in the downtown areas of Manaus, on the waterfront and in the igarapés.

In downtown Manaus, we also observed and followed selective waste collection, which is carried out daily «door-to-door» in one of the commercial districts near the port. The workers are organized into teams, mostly composed of women, who walk the streets, talk to the shopkeepers and check on the disposal of solid and organic waste. Two mini-collector trucks drive through the streets, one with a closed body for collecting organic materials. The coordinator of the work pointed out the difficulties in getting merchants to participate and disputes with waste pickers who rummage through the garbage looking for materials they prefer such as cardboard. The solid waste is sent to a cooperative that also prefers materials that are easily sold, according to the interlocutor. So they do not welcome small plastics items and packaging, for example.<sup>31</sup>

Collection for large objects has also been implemented by Municipal Secretariat for Public Cleaning. Those who need can contact the Special Commission for Dissemination and Guidance of Public Cleaning Policy CEDOLP to set an appointment for pick up. According to the employees in this sector, this method of collection helps ensure that objects such as furniture and electrical appliances are not disposed of in the igarapés, a relatively common practice in the city, considering that the waters that bathe the urban territory are inhabitable borders, from the Ponta Negra neighborhood, a high income district with luxury housing,

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<sup>30</sup> Document signed by all of the event organizers.

<sup>31</sup> Prefeito de Recife apresenta a CIRSOL - 1ª Conferência Internacional de Resíduos Sólidos. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GirD3beKrUk>. Accessed 20 November 2022.

to the more peripheral areas of the city, pejoratively called *bodozal*. The urban areas of the *várzea* – which flood when the Amazon rises and are dry when the rainy season ends - are included among the peripheral areas of Manaus, where stilt houses are usually built on the beds and banks of these waterways.

In an effort to understand how these institutional waste disposal actions affect Manaus as a territory closely related to water, we sought to observe the economic bases directly involved in the industrial center and the river traffic of goods from the port of Manaus. We also looked at the various relationships of sociability and ways of life peculiar to this region where the giant Rio Negro and Rio Amazonas meet, forming a profusion of waters and micro-basins that overflow into *igarapés* that spread throughout the city. This allowed us to record two specific practices related to river waste collection.

One of the actions, the collection of garbage on the banks of the Mindu River, located in a municipal park in the Parque Dez neighborhood in Manaus, was undertaken in partnership with an Asian multinational company in the industrial district with Semulsp. It was an environmental awareness-raising activity in which guests and company employees, approximately one hundred people including ourselves, participated in environmental education activities. These included a thematic presentation on the environmental issue of garbage by employees of the municipal institution, with talks and songs about sanitation and collecting garbage, with artists, musicians and circus activities produced by Semulsp's own employees, as well as interactive physical warm-up activities for the participating public with a specialized physical education professional, to prepare for the vigorous garbage collection later undertaken on the banks of the Mindu stream inside the park.

The area that is now Mindu Park was used, until the 1970s, as a beach where the people of Manaus could relax and bathe in the stream. It is now completely unsuitable for bathers, as dumped garbage and sewage accumulate between the water and the native forest, and entry for bathing is forbidden (Ribeiro; Vieiralves, 2012).

In 2007, the Mindu Urban Ecological Corridor was created under the city's Master Plan (Law 671/02), article 56 of which deals with the creation of ecological corridors. The policy of preserving riparian forests adjacent to watercourses was instituted on July 18, 2000, through the National System of Conservation Districts (SNUC), which defines ecological corridors as:

portions of natural or semi-natural ecosystems, linking conservation districts, which allow the flow of genes and the movement of biota between them, facilitating the dispersal of species and the recolonization of degraded areas, as well as the maintenance of populations that require areas larger than those of the individual districts for their survival (Brasil, 2000).

To reach the *igarapé* during the collection actions on its banks, we walked through the forest along a trail approximately 800m long, in a clean area with signs about wild animals and precautions about alligators that may appear, especially at the water's edge, as shown in the photographs:

We wore repellent and were equipped with helmets, gloves and large plastic raffia bags to collect garbage. The need for the warm-up became clear during the journey, considering the difficult work of collecting materials, especially plastics stuck between the roots, which was compounded by the insalubrious environment and foul smell. Collecting garbage among the stones of the stream, combined with the dangers of encountering aggressive and venomous animals, as well as the large number of insects, indicated the challenges of this type of socio-educational practice.

Shoes, bags, Styrofoam, various plastic materials and even an inflatable mattress were removed from an area of approximately 200 meters, just a small portion of the bank of the *igarapé*. A lot of material remained buried amid the trunks and vegetation. The action affected us because of the understanding we gained in loco about the degradation caused by dumping garbage and the lack of public policies to address the distinct

conditions that require specific cleaning methods in riverbeds and watercourses. The scenery of a putrid stream running through the forest seems to be a dystopian vision of a not-too-distant future with the extinction of the element most essential for human life.

**Plate 1:** Cleaning activity of the Igarapé do Mindu – register of the group, (Camila Iribarrem, Nov/2022)



At another occasion we also accompanied a cleaning of the waterfront in the central region of the city, where the Port of Manaus, the Adolpho Lisboa Municipal Market and the Modern Manaus Market are located. Because the municipal market was built in 1880, during the Belle Époque period, and because its main entrance and façade is in front of the Rua dos Barés, with its rear portions facing those arriving to the city via the Rio Negro, Manaus became known as a city built «with its back to the river», as anthropologist Sérgio Ivan Gil Braga (n.d.) pointed out on the website of the Instituto Nacional Brasil Plural, a research network between the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) and the Federal University of Amazonas (UFAM).<sup>32</sup>

The methods for cleaning and maintaining the waterfront, which are the responsibility of the municipality, consist of collecting and sweeping up all the garbage produced within the main street grid that crosses the bank of the Rio Negro and gives access to the street fairs, the market and the floating port. The port floats on iron buoys below the structure that gives access to the river. They are suspended across 18m and are part of the contiguous structures of the surrounding area.

Much of the garbage collected along the waterfront is carried on a large ferry that docks daily on the riverbank to collect the waste, where there is no separation of materials for recycling. Even so, during the interview with the person in charge of cleaning the waterfront, one person picking waste was seen on the ferry on the banks of the Rio Negro. The accumulation of garbage is noticeable in this area, considering the intense movement of people, boats, and cars and, even with continuous sweeping, along the streets, buildings and the beach that emerges during the dry season, the presence of plastic and paper is constant. In this area, which the local population calls “a beira” [the front], there is an intense fish trade, on the beach sand and in the markets of Manaus Moderna and Mercado [Big Market], as the Adolpho Lisboa Municipal Market is popularly known.

Our interlocutor, a Semulsp employee who works in the igarapés sector, explained that there are also other small boats that enter narrower riverbeds. However, this service is not carried out daily and mainly responds to specific requests to clean the streams. He made recurring complaints about the improper disposal of waste by the population, and mentioned the environmental education work carried out by teams that travel around the city. We did not meet any members of these outsourced teams, but this practice was also discussed by other Semulsp employees. According to them, these actions are taking place under the current municipal administration.

In mid-April, after a torrential storm on March 12, 2023 left hundreds homeless and at least eight dead, the Manaus city government promoted billboards at strategic points in the city, with the following phrase: «GARBAGE KILLS». We heard from an interlocutor, a campaigner against the installation of a landfill in Iranduba: “with this propaganda, that garbage kills, now they’ll really want to dump their garbage far away from Manaus, and they’ll gain support from the population to send it here.» The catchphrase used by municipal communication networks can be characterized as a dangerous instrument for disguising responsibility of government authorities for the lack of infrastructure and sanitation that plagues homes on the banks of Manaus’ igarapés, transferring responsibility for the accumulation of garbage to these places and their inhabitants. The garbage is also carried away from various other parts of the city by the waterways that criss-cross the urban region.

With the occurrence of fatalities and the collapse of hundreds of houses in different areas of Manaus during this seasonal rainy season, also called the Amazon winter by the local population, some data on access to infrastructure and sanitation in the city have been published on regional news sites such as Amazonas Atual. The site mentioned a survey carried out by the Trata Brasil Institute, which ranks Manaus 89th of Brazil’s 100 largest cities in terms of basic sanitation in 2022. The report presented other statistics, including those about

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<sup>32</sup> BRAGA, S. I. G. s.d. “Outras imagens, paisagens e histórias de Manaus e suas águas”. Available in <https://brasilplural.paginas.ufsc.br/redes-de-pesquisa/outras-imagens-paisagens-e-historias-de-manau-e-suas-aguas>.

sewerage, reporting that according to data from the National Sanitation Information System (SNIS), 78% of Manaus does not have sewage collection. The question that remains is: Is it really garbage that kills or the policies for handling this waste and the urban infrastructure? But any clarification is certainly not part of the municipal administration's visual communication and advertising program.

**Figure 2:** Advertising campaign posted on the Viaduto do Coroado (Camila Iribarrem, Apr/2023)



**Plate 2:** Garbage carried on ferries, docking in the riverside communities at the port of Manaus (Camila Iribarrem, 2022)





## Recife under the tide: aspects of housing and waste management among the local population

This issue, The tide, the mangrove is very hard work, right? Very difficult, very heavy precisely because of this battle that we fight, which is a daily struggle, right? You have to survive on the tide, knowing that the tide is where you receive all the effluents. Which is the sewage that isn't treated and is thrown straight into the river, into the canals and ends up on the beach, in the sea. So the mangrove filters all kinds of garbage. It always comes and sticks to the mangrove roots. So today you see an ever-increasing amount of garbage in the mangroves, right? Whether it's plastic, Styrofoam or pet bottles, right? Or household appliances? (Cássio)

There are people who throw animals there [...] I found a dead horse behind the navy. A lot of people go fishing, I just don't. All this generates bacteria, rats, everything. [...] It's been difficult, right? Because at times we have, and sometimes we don't. When the tide is good, you can fish, but when it's not, you have to collect cans and recycle. But even so, sometimes I try, you know? (Maria do Carmo)

These comments were taken during a field trip for an environmental documentary workshop, in which I, as an anthropologist, was responsible for interviewing people who live from fishing in the downtown area of Recife, between the Maurício de Nassau and 12 de Setembro bridges. The idea of the documentary was to find out what the tide signifies and what it means to live off the tide at this point on the River Capibaribe. Cássio and Maria do Carmo's stories converge on some of the daily problematics that affect those who live in this city: knowledge about the tide and water pollution. It serves as a source of income and food. When the tide is high, it allows navigation, but it also transports the waste dumped in the water. Which becomes more apparent at low tide. On the other hand, for Maria do Carmo, for example, when the tide doesn't allow fishing, her livelihood becomes recycling, especially aluminum cans.

About the degradation of the Capibaribe River in the past decade, Bezerra and Melo (2014) affirm:

Throughout the city's development, by being treated as a waste receptor due to the lack of sanitary sewage systems, the degradation of the Capibaribe River becomes explicit. The public sector has not invested in improving these systems, nor in improving the quality of the city's water. Only around 33% of the city of Recife has basic sanitation, highlighting the fact that companies also cause water pollution, since the end of the 19th century when sugar mills were built (Bezerra; Melo, 2014: 99).

The authors identified that the landscapes of both the Capibaribe and the mangrove areas represent historical and cultural landmarks in Recife. However, when asked about the meanings of these landscapes, lower class residents point to the importance of these areas as responsible for survival, since they are a source of food. Rivers and mangroves are also places for housing:

Where the village began there on the water, today there are brick houses. Where they want to go, take away our homes, pay what they want. Where you and I who have children [...] I don't even know if she's here, but her daughter fell into the tide and got cellulite on her face. So lots of people think it's bad, because today we're here, wanting our rights to be able to vote. And who is going to be our volunteer leader? How do we vote? Do we fit in? Who will be able to vote? Or is it just people appointed by you who can vote? The community came here today to fight [...]. Because houses are collapsing. You're talking about other communities, but go to Vila Itapuí, where houses are collapsing. We walk there, when it rains, the tide comes in, the houses are flooded with water and this has been going on for more than 40 years, I'm 29 years old, because I grew up in that sea (Speech by a resident of Vila Itapuí in the Fórum Prezeis - 31/03/2023).



The resident's indignation concerns the difficulties faced by the population living in a locality in the Pina neighborhood, bordered by the Tejipió River. She highlights the community's lack of recognition as a Special Interest Zone (Zeis), which is essential for inclusion in housing programs. She argues that the houses have existed for at least forty years and that residents suffer from the effects of the tide, the constant danger of flooding and water pollution that can cause disease.

When you visit the homes in flooded areas, you realize that some of the waste that surrounds the different landscapes comes from other places, carried by the tide and floods. This information was repeated by residents of the localities surveyed here, when they mentioned the «garbage that comes from the river». At the same time, these people end up creating ways of managing this waste.

In the Afogados neighborhood, near Largo da Paz, there is an organization of residents and waste pickers who try to mediate the conflicts generated by the lack of selective waste collection. All the waste pickers with whom I had contact also lived in the neighborhood. This form of waste management is seen in various parts of the city, where the presence of people who push carts with recycled material and other waste pickers, together with the residents organization, contributes to urban cleanliness in the area. In the same neighborhood, the Bueiro community sells shrimp for their subsistence. There is a shrimp farm there, in a mangrove area, where the residents themselves have installed an artisanal solid waste containment network to reduce the impact of pollution on the farm.

Still in Afogados, in the São Miguel Housing Complex, which was delivered in 2009 and built to house people who had been living in stilt houses in the former Marrom Glacê community on the banks of the Tejipió River, we perceive the abandonment by public authorities also in terms of waste management. The area has garbage collection twice a week. There has been no environmental education program, and no one to encourage the separation of waste in the space destined for disposal - which is a place conducive to the proliferation of animals and insects that carry disease. At the same time, when these residents recall their memories of the environment of the stilt houses they lived in before moving to the housing complex, concerns about waste disposal are raised as a problem linked to the social vulnerability of living on stilts. However, when transferred to a region with planned buildings and spaces, this concern doesn't seem to be so present. One of the residents, a community leader and former Zeis representative, who took part in the entire transfer process since the 1990s, highlighted the feeling of social class ascension generated by the move as the main factor for this lack of concern.

In all of these areas, the lack of coverage of the city waste management policies can be seen. In March 2022, the city of Recife hosted the First International Solid Residues Conference, which brought together government institutions, private companies, representatives of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the scientific community and civil society. The event, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) proposed by the UN's 2030 Agenda, featured several round tables, conferences, meetings, workshops, and cultural attractions that stimulated important debates on residue management and global warming in different dimensions. At the closing ceremony, the Pernambuco Charter was signed by all the I CIRSOL co-chairs, to «promote awareness of environmental sustainability, universal respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms, and exert efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals». Both the state government of Pernambuco and the Recife municipal government (PMR) signed the document - the municipal administration went further. In a speech at the opening Deputy Mayor Isabella Roldão announced the intention to make the capital of Pernambuco a national example in residue management:

I have to say that, despite all the challenges, we have managed to implement a pioneering action. I don't know if you're aware, but at the beginning of 2021, Mayor João Campos decreed an absolute ban on the purchase of disposable plastics inside the City Hall building. [...] But we still go to institutions that naturally still use disposable

cups. That's an outrage. And we need to understand that a cup like that takes as much as it leaves. And where does it all go? We also have a great example within our home, our offices: all the organic waste generated within Recife City Hall is composted. I even invite you to do this. It's a very simple action. I compost at my house and I invite anyone who comes by to smell it. You can get close to my buckets. There's no smell. And we can really make a big impact if we start, each and every one of us, to build this within our homes, to bring it into our condominiums, to make Recife something we dream of. Recife should be recognized as the capital of sustainability and we've been moving towards that.

In her full speech, the vice-mayor announced her intention to turn the capital of Pernambuco into an example of sustainability, considering the 17 SDGs of the UN's 2030 Agenda. Although he did not attend the opening of the event in person, Mayor João Campos took a similar position in an institutional video presented on the I CIRSOL YouTube channel:

It's going to be a very important moment for us to be able to present Recife's good practices and bring organizations from throughout the country, from academia and the private sector, to learn about initiatives that could be of interest to our city in the coming years. And we invite you to take part and follow this whole discussion. [...] Recall that Recife already has a very strong structure in this area. We have a monitoring center that is a reference for all of Brazil, where we can use georeferencing to accompany, monitor, and coordinate all the urban cleaning actions in our city. In addition to RECICLAMAIS, ECORECIFE, there are various actions aimed at constantly modernizing our city when it comes to solid waste.

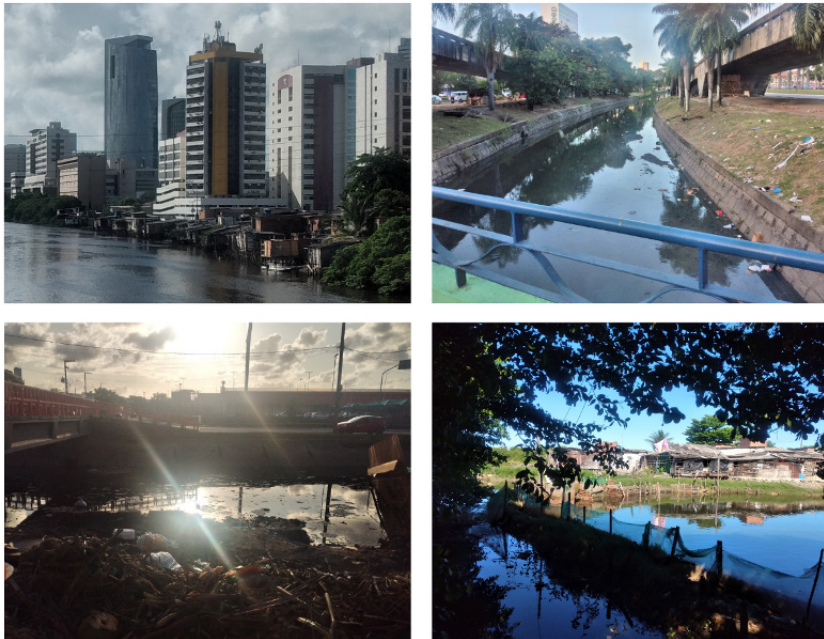
However, when we traveled around Recife, as in most Brazilian municipalities, we noticed that the population's access to the state apparatus differs according to geographical location and social stratum. There is a discrepancy between the discourse of the municipal administration, which is considered official, and the narratives of residents of peripheral locations, as well as the landscape itself. The production of this segregation, to return to Teresa Caldeira's (2000) concept, generates various conflicts, forming borders that divide areas of the city not only by state coverage (Feltran, 2010) but, in this case, also by the targeting of environmental education campaigns. These areas of tension were evident during the floods that afflicted the city between May and June 2022. A few months ago, during the first precipitation that began the rainy season, the city government's Instagram profile had a post in which it blamed the population for the flooding, which mostly affected socially vulnerable populations.

A few months later, as mentioned, the city government announced the launch of Recife Limpa on Instagram as well. The program aims to expand waste collection and encourage conscious disposal. As a result, the number of workers and the fleet of trucks were increased. In addition, the cleaning of streets, rivers, canals, conduits, and gutters has been included in the planning. In the first week of the program, more than 4,100 tons of irregularly disposed solid waste were removed (Prefeitura do Recife, 2022).

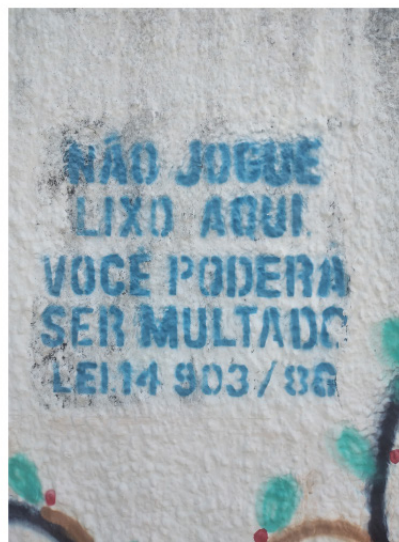
If we go beyond institutional discourse to see how public policies are present in peripheral regions, in flooded areas, the landscape presented by the municipal administration – and the discourse produced by it – changes. We find a language that seems to blame the population despite the fact that access to urban cleaning services is scarce. No data was found on the removal of improperly deposited waste in the neighborhoods analyzed, but a large part of the actions planned in the recently created Recife Limpa program are still concentrated in tourist areas and the city's main transport routes, as well as portions of the Capibaribe River. The Jordão Canal, for example, located on one of the access corridors between the Boa Viagem neighborhood (South Zone) and the North/Center Zone, had its second clean-up of the year carried out in December 2022 (Prefeitura do Recife, 2022).

Therefore the Recife municipal government has different relationships with the city: on one hand, it welcomes people who can compost, choose what they can eat and separate food waste from recyclables; on the other hand, those who do not have access to selective collection are excluded and blamed for the inconvenience caused by the irregular disposal of this waste. This is the population that is most affected by these problems. In this second case, it generates relationships of conflict and alliances among residents when the problem of waste is addressed.

**Plate 3:** Flooded and downtown areas – Recife (Caroline de Almeida 2022/2023)







## Between the tides and rainy seasons

Based on the concept of environmental memory (Devos, 2008; Soares, 2016), which integrates the perspective of political ecology to the agency of memory, we came across narratives about living on the water and social injustices and urban inequalities in historical processes. These narratives emphasized how these processes developed from housing policies of segregation, under a sanitary logic, constituting urban processes in which part of the population is left out. We are referring to urban segregation triggered by mechanisms of social discrimination, intersected by markers of race and gender, which fall on residents of peripheral areas near waterways, who are usually excluded from urban planning in cities. In Manaus, they originated from the migration of riverside populations from the interior of the Amazon, as well as some traditional peoples. In Recife, they are associated with the historical exclusion of residents of *mocambos* and *cortiços* [tenements] from central areas. Manaus and Recife are capital cities where there is a profusion of waterways and, in the case of Recife, seawaters as well, with specific forms of occupation along the beds and banks of rivers, *igarapés* and mangroves. Along the waters, communities and relationships are built and seasonal changes produce moments of risk and uncertainty when Amazonian floods or ocean storms consume their homes, producing different spatialities and requiring survival strategies that are poorly supported by public authorities. Devos (2009) in his research on the environmental crisis and urban trajectories of residents of the Arquipélago neighborhood on Ilha da Pintada and Ilha Grande dos Marinheiros, in Porto Alegre/RS, discusses how local populations live and use natural resources in urban areas and the socio-environmental conflicts that arise from these relationships:

Today, a series of institutions and norms have come to constrain social relations related to the use of natural resources, in contrast to the global process of development of urban-industrial societies. Urban and non-urban populations have had to rethink their daily practices based on these constraints. It's not just the «traditional populations» who occupy forests and coastal areas that need to be thought of in terms of their trajectories of rootedness in a natural landscape, but above all the large numbers of people who have left natural areas and the countryside to settle the peripheries of urban centers, most often occupying the unbuilt space, what remains of the «natural» environment in metropolitan regions (Devos, 2009: 305).

For more than a century, the low-income populations of Manaus and Recife from these areas have experienced processes of gentrification and segregation due to urban reforms in the central areas that denied their presence in floating cities, *mocambos* or *palafitas*. They were pushed to peripheral and inhospitable areas, to housing projects built to house them, or had to find new housing on their own. As we have pointed out in our work, this pattern of segregation is also common to other Brazilian metropolises (Caldeira, 2000) and shows us the precariousness and contradictions of urbanization plans that disregard local populations.

Meanwhile, in the circumstances observed in Manaus and Recife, water is practically devoid of life and its quality as an environmental asset (Devos, 2009). The rivers, *igarapés*, and seawaters are transformed into garbage dumps and sanitary sewage, subject to the contradictions and missteps of public interventions and their countless urbanization or requalification projects. As we have seen, the interventions distance the waters from the population and further exacerbate the lack of care and recognition of their importance as finite and unsustainable assets and that their preservation is not part of a broad and fair socio-environmental policy.

In Manaus, actions by institutional bodies are inconsistent, with no continuous and effective programs for cleaning and conserving the waters. We observed that elite areas, such as the Ponta Negra neighborhood, have waste recycling, but not those areas of the city where the movement and disposal of waste is even more intense. Environmental awareness programs could be more effective in these regions, especially on the banks of the city's waterways and streams, where peripheral neighborhoods are located and where sanitation practices are sometimes non-existent.

In Recife, the current municipal administration focuses on the problematic of irregular solid waste disposal in its struggle for sustainable development. However, as noted by Silva et al. (2020), effective waste management models must consider the socio-economic aspects of the various social sectors. The municipality's seems to have great difficulty in communicating with and raising awareness among people living in the peripheral and low income neighborhoods of the city, which is even more aggravating in areas with houses built along waterways. The municipality blames the residents of these areas for the pollution of rivers and mangroves. On the other hand, these blamed residents claim that much of the waste that is deposited in these places, which causes disease and aggravates flooding during the rains, comes from other regions of the city, or even from other cities.

This aspect, which discriminates against and marginalizes residents of flooded areas due to the concentration of waste deposited on the water, is the point of encounter and convergence in the research between Manaus and Recife. The two capitals have quite different socio-cultural backgrounds and regionalities, which is reflected in the actions of their waste management policies. Beyond the differences in the magnitude of their waters and the different ways their populations live with the waters, the problematics identified in this article are the dark side of solid waste management policy, present in an invisible «modus operandi» in both cities.

This action by public management, which converges on the agencing and produces a public expression of sustainable action to achieve the goals of the National Solid Waste Policy Law, hides the perversity behind the propaganda that holds residents living on the banks of watercourses responsible for occupying these areas and for being the producers of the largest concentrations of waste in cities. However, what is hidden behind the images attributed to these groups is the absence of respect, basic sanitation, decent housing, and recognition of human complexities that are needed to present a fair socio-environmental policy for these individuals. After all, it is precisely because they find themselves between the boundaries of solid land and watercourses that these inhabitants become recipients of the waste that circulates through the cities and that the waters carry to their shores, whether by rain, floods or tidal currents.

Meanwhile, the study made explicit the hierarchical way solid wastes are managed, by privileging economic power and aggravating in segregated services the denial of the right to equal access to municipal public cleaning and sanitation services. Under the capitalist reproduction of waste, compounded by the distorted use of public policies to promote recycling, sustainability, and compliance with national solid waste policy laws, the false utopias of recycling are revealed in Manaus and Recife. In these cities, the waters, which are protagonists of ways of living and inhabiting, carry garbage like shipwrecks that flow into the oceans of life on the planet.

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# Notes on wine growing and the Circular Economy in the context of intensifying climate change

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## Abstract

This article addresses the Circular Economy within the scope of wine growing from an interdisciplinary perspective. Conceiving wine as a cultural, social, and economic item resulting from progressively elaborate techniques, the text highlights the transformation of wine into a product of big business. Wine's dependence on environmental factors, and association with various negative environmental impacts, particularly the increasing production of waste are discussed. The article presents how the need to control these impacts is growing in various contexts, mainly because of the intensification of climate change. It also examines how the notion of circular economy has become a guiding axis for the reconfiguration of this field, both in terms of mitigating its impacts and exploring other potentials related to wine production. Focusing on the Brazilian context, it presents the peculiarities of local grape and wine production and the advancement of research based on the management of solid waste. In parallel, it points to obstacles that arise in the implementation of greater circularity in this field.

**Keywords:** Wine, Viticulture, wine production, Circular Economy, Solid waste, Climate change.

# Notas sobre vitivinicultura e Economia Circular no contexto de acirramento das mudanças climáticas

## Resumo

Este artigo aborda Economia Circular no âmbito da vitivinicultura a partir de uma perspectiva interdisciplinar. Concebendo vinho como item cultural, social e econômico, resultante de técnicas progressivamente elaboradas, ressalta sua transformação em produto da grande indústria. Aponta sua dependência dos fatores ambientais, ao mesmo tempo, sua associação a diversos impactos ambientais negativos, destacando-se a produção crescente de resíduos. Aponta como a necessidade de se contornar essa problemática vem crescendo em diversos contextos, fundada sobretudo no acirramento das mudanças climáticas, e como a noção de Economia Circular tem se constituído eixo norteador para a reconfiguração desse campo, tanto no sentido de se dirimir os impactos referidos quanto em explorar outros potenciais relacionados à vitivinicultura. Enfocando o contexto brasileiro, apresenta particularidades da vitivinicultura local e o avanço de pesquisas a partir da gestão dos resíduos sólidos. Paralelamente, aponta para os obstáculos que se apresentam no âmbito da efetivação de maior circularidade nesse campo.

**Palavras-chave:** Vinho, Vitivinicultura, Economia Circular, Resíduos sólidos, Mudanças climáticas.

# Notes on wine growing and the Circular Economy in the context of intensifying climate change<sup>1</sup>

Carla Pires Vieira da Rocha and Eunice Sueli Nodari

## Introduction

Wine is above all the result of human action, and there is very little left in the production of this drink that can be considered *natural*, something untouched by human hands (Black, 2013). Wine is therefore a cultural product and, as such, is also the result of the progressive use of techniques, which have been increasingly improved. Over time, these techniques have allowed for greater control over the different stages of wine production, from soil preparation and growing and harvesting grapes, to fermentation, conservation, bottling and labeling. These processes made it possible for wine to withstand long-distance travel while retaining the flavor of its place of origin. Like many other foods offered for consumption in our contemporary world, from being a locally produced and consumed beverage, wine has also become a product of big business, developed at large scale, and distributed on an increasingly global scale. As a result of this process, the wine industry has had a growing environmental impact.

Although it is not a basic necessity and there is still a certain dichotomy regarding its consumption<sup>2</sup>, wine is an agricultural product, and seen as food, considering it contains energy and nutrients. From this perspective, it also encompasses other dimensions. Black and Ulin (2013), who note that there are few studies of wine, affirm that categorizing wine only as an alcoholic beverage winds up obscuring its ritual, symbolic and social importance.

To this extent, wine can also be seen as a manifestation of the relationship of humans with their environment, although it is not always a harmonious relationship, revealing tensions between human beings and their natural environment (Black and Ulin, 2013). This perspective also applies to reflecting on its production and consumption, at a time when environmental problems are worsening, questioning the very continuity of winemaking as we know it.

Wine production depends on several factors, including the good interaction of land, water, and air. From this perspective, the environment in which a wine is produced is conceived as one of the fundamental aspects for its qualification and valorization, especially in terms of its cultural dimension. These factors are part of the notion of *terroir*<sup>3</sup>, which has contributed to the constitution of imaginaries related to this drink, contributing to

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<sup>1</sup> This work was carried out with the support of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel - Brazil (CAPES) - Código de Financiamento 001 and is part of the research related to the project linked to the Laboratory of Immigration, Migration and Environmental History - LABIMHA/UFSC: From land to table: an environmental history of grape and wine production in the Americas, coordinated by Prof. Dr. Eunice Sueli Nodari, funded by CNPq.

<sup>2</sup> Grivetti (1995) argues that perhaps no other food shares with wine the dichotomy, which has been expressed since the past, of being praised when consumed in moderation, while condemned when consumed in excess.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of *terroir* originated in France and its significance was initially focused on various French agricultural products, in addition to wine. However, in the early twentieth century, the concept became predominant in the wine sector, to the extent that in terms of *terroir*, wines were associated with specific properties and regions. This was especially important to laws for controlled appellation that emerged in the 1920s that sought to ensure the notion of a regional product (Ulin, 2013), among other objectives. This perspective also extends to the growing appreciation of processes that highlight the origin of products, materialized in the form of certification systems, such as the Denomination of Origin (DO) and the Indication of Provenance (IP). The concept also serves to exalt certain wines. In the words of Patterson and Buechsenstein (2018), for example, the notion of *terroir* is at the heart of what makes a wine special.

the prestige of various areas around the world<sup>4</sup>. But while it is dependent on the environment, wine production generates negative environmental impacts, including the production of waste.

The intensification of solid waste production is a global problem. Industrialized societies marked by intensive consumption are responsible for the greatest generation of waste. According to the United Nations (UN), more than 2 billion tons of waste are produced worldwide every year<sup>5</sup>. In the face of the growing environmental crisis, marked by the acceleration of climate change, the production and management of waste has become a crucial issue. In the field of grape and wine production, environmental issues have taken center stage in recent years. The frequency and intensity of extreme weather events has jeopardized the continuity of wine production in various regions, while provoking the need for a reordering in this field.

Using an interdisciplinary perspective, we examine the main negative environmental impacts of vineyards and wineries, considering the worsening climate crisis. We then focus on the notion of circular economy as a guiding principle for reconfiguring this field, both in terms of reducing these impacts and exploring other potentials related to wine growing. Finally, we look at the Brazilian context, the particularities of local vineyards and wineries, and the progress of research into solid waste management. We also point out obstacles to achieving greater circularity in this field in the country.

## Environmental impacts of vineyards and wineries and the climate emergency

Wine has been produced since ancient times. Over time, its production has expanded worldwide<sup>6</sup>, in keeping with globalization processes. Meanwhile, wine has been incorporated even in countries where its consumption was previously non-existent. Progressive technological improvements involving production, distribution and marketing have favored industrial production of wine, contributing to its transformation into a progressively globalized product.

More than 67 countries now produce, export, import and consume wine (Zacharof, 2017). The expansion of winemaking has also led to its alignment with changes that have taken place in agricultural practices in many countries since the middle of the last century, a period when techniques were developed to boost food production and transcend scarcity. As a result, the agri-food system became increasingly conditioned to the use of agrochemicals, a fact explored in the renowned book by biologist Raquel Carson, *Silent Spring* (2010 [1962]), in which she denounced risks related to the indiscriminate use of pesticides in the United States after World War II. As Shiva (2016) explains, this post-war period experienced what became known as the Green Revolution, which placed new demands on scarce renewable and non-renewable resources and required heavy investments in fertilizers, pesticides, seeds, water, and energy<sup>7</sup>. In this context, intensive agriculture generated severe ecological destruction, marked by the waste and destruction of land, water sources and biodiversity, causing new types of scarcity and vulnerability, as well as new levels of inefficiency in the use of resources.

It can therefore be considered that, from a broader perspective, the development and expansion of wine growing over the last century has reflected the panorama of changes in agri-food systems on a global scale brought about by food modernization. A model based on intensive production thus prevails, in which the

4 On representations linked to the notion of *terroir*, from a social, cultural, historical, and political perspective, see Daynes (2013) and Ulin (2013).

5 Available at: <https://nacoesunidas.org/humanidade-produz-mais-de-2-bilhoes-de-toneladas-de-lixo-por-ano-diz-onu-em-dia-mundial/> Accessed on: Sept. 10, 2022

6 About the global expansion of grape and wine production see: Phillips (2005); McGovern & Fleming (1994); Johnson (1999); Tattersall & Desalle (2015).

7 Data from 2018 from the now-defunct Brazilian Wine Institute (Ibravin) on the registration of pesticides in Brazil for growing vines revealed that of the 61 herbicides registered, 14 are extremely toxic; of the 49 insecticides registered, 14 are extremely toxic and of the 159 fungicides registered, 58 are extremely toxic. Many of the pesticides widely used in Brazil have been banned in several countries. Research carried out by Bombardi (2017) revealed that, of the pesticides used on grapevines in Brazil in 2019, 13 had been banned in the European Union. According to data published by the Brazilian Ministry of Agriculture, 474 new pesticides were registered in the country in 2019 alone, more than in the previous 14 years combined. In 2021, this number rose to 562, helping to maintain Brazil's position as world champion in the use of pesticides in agriculture.

search for quality and competitiveness in wine production reflects a dynamic in which foods are mass-produced at a lower cost and can therefore circulate widely around the world. Like the production of many other food items, wine production involves massive generation of waste and a growing use of chemical inputs, such as synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and acaricides. Therefore, while in the past vineyards and wineries also involved modifying landscapes and altering ecosystems, the negative socio-environmental impacts of this activity have become progressively worse<sup>8</sup>.

As Christ and Burritt (2013) point out, the negative environmental consequences of winemaking are mainly related to water consumption, impacts on water quality, the generation of solid organic and inorganic waste, the use of large amounts of energy, considerable greenhouse gas emissions, the use of chemicals (pesticides, fertilizers and other chemical products), and land use problems<sup>9</sup>. According to these authors, these issues can be further categorized according to the stage of the supply chain in which they occur: viticulture, winemaking, or distribution. In addition to these impacts, one can also include the manufacture and disposal of bottles, corks - which involve the cultivation of oak - and labels, the refrigeration of wines, and the transportation of wines to retailers. The distribution and post-production logistics of this drink are also intensive in terms of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions, partly due to the dependence on heavy and bulky forms of packaging - among others.

It is now commonly recognized that the intensification of environmental degradation is directly linked to the acceleration of climate change, which is reflected in increased flooding, storms, forest fires, droughts, species extinction and ocean acidification, among other consequences. According to the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), released in 2022, there is no doubt that human activities are responsible for global warming<sup>10</sup>. The impacts of human action on the planet are marking a new geological epoch, known as the Anthropocene. Based on this concept, a new moment in the history of the earth has begun in which humanity has become the most powerful influence on global ecology (McNeil; Engelke, 2016).

Among the main activities associated with the climate crisis are those linked to agriculture and food production, which account for about one-third of greenhouse gas emissions. Data for 2021 from the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) show that atmospheric levels of greenhouse gases have reached amounts<sup>11</sup>. Between 1990 and 2021, the warming effect derived from these long-lasting gases increased by almost 50%, with carbon dioxide being responsible for around 80% of this increase<sup>12</sup>. In Brazil, 2021 was marked by the highest rate of greenhouse gas emissions in the last 19 years<sup>13</sup>. In October 2019, scientists from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a warning about the importance of halving greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2030 and bringing them to zero by the middle of the century, to avoid the even more intense impacts of climate change.

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8 Since the 1990s, in the context of advanced globalization, the number of wine-producing countries considered in the quality category (wines produced from *vitis viniferas*), which was previously limited and concentrated on the European continent, has changed significantly. Countries recognized for their wine production in the past, such as France, Italy, and Spain, have had to face international competition for wines, especially from countries such as Chile, Australia, the USA, and South Africa.

9 As Christ and Burritt (2013) argue, the cultivation of wine grapes and wine production are not environmentally benign activities. The fact that viticulture has been established in certain regions for a long time and that the vines are grown in a permanent culture, results in long-term problems such as soil compaction, water pollution, and destruction of fauna and flora, contributing to environmental degradation (Rosner et al., 2015).

10 According to the IPCC, of the 1.1°C of warming that has occurred since the pre-industrial era, less than 0.1°C is related to natural forces such as volcanoes or variations in the sun.

11 Data from SEEG, the Climate Observatory's System for Estimating Greenhouse Gas Emissions, revealed that in 2021, Brazil's greenhouse gas emissions had their highest increase in almost two decades, reaching 2.42 billion gross tons of CO<sub>2</sub>, an increase of 12.2% over 2020 (2.16 billion tons). Also according to the SEEG, the last decade saw the biggest growth in emissions in human history: 9.1 billion tons more than in the previous decade - even with the growing publicity about environmental problems.

12 The goal is to achieve what was stipulated in the Paris Agreement, limiting global warming to below 2°C, preferably 1.5°C, above pre-industrial levels. WMO data indicates that the average global temperature is now more than 1.1°C above the pre-industrial level of the 1850-1900 period.

13 Available at: <https://news.un.org/pt/story/2022/10/1804397> Accessed Nov. 2/2022.



With regard to the influence of wine production on the worsening climate crisis, since 2018, the International Organization of Vine and Wine (OIV), the main body promoting grape and wine production at a global level and of which Brazil is a signatory, has included in its recommendations to the various national bodies that are members of this institution the need to implement more sustainable practices at vineyards and wineries. This guideline also considers the impacts on wine growing caused by climate change, which is affecting both small and large wine producers in different countries, including Brazil.

In some wine-growing regions the systematic increase in temperatures associated with global warming has contributed to the quality and quantity of grapes and has even hindered the emergence of fungi in vineyards. But more broadly, it is noted that extreme temperatures are causing major heat waves (according to experts, this is a factor that can cause fruit to dry out, impeding growth), frosts and hail, damaging harvests in different seasons. For example, in 2021 Brazil's main wine-growing region, the Serra Gaúcha, suffered from intense frosts that compromised the development of shoots of some wine varieties.

In addition, recurrent forest fires have been decimating vineyards and turning renowned wineries into ashes. Observing the increased frequency of these events and the fact that wine grapes are very sensitive to changes in climate and temperature, the climate crisis is putting the survival of grape and wine production at risk in Brazil and various regions around the world<sup>14</sup>.

A 2017 report on the state of world wine production by the International Organization of Vine and Wine (OIV)<sup>15</sup> pointed to an 8.2% drop in world wine production, representing one of the lowest levels in several decades, due to extreme weather events, ranging from frost to drought in Europe's leading producers, Italy, France, and Spain, as well as Germany<sup>16</sup>. As global climate change intensifies, extreme events, such as prolonged drought, are expected to become even more common. (Herberger, 2012)<sup>17</sup>.

In the past, to make a wine considered to have good quality, the focus was on the variety of grape to be grown, the cultivation and harvesting methods and control of the fermentation process. In the face of the unpredictable conditions imposed by the environmental crisis, uncertainties are emerging about the precision of these stages.

Brazil ranks 14th in world wine production. In addition to the negative environmental impacts of grape and wine production mentioned, which are also found in this country, most wine production, in addition to generating a large amount of waste, is guided by an agricultural model based heavily on monoculture and the use of synthetic agrochemicals, causing damage to the environment and to human and animal health. Instead of reviewing this production model, the search for a standard of excellence for Brazilian wines to allow them to compete in the international market has prioritized the development of cutting-edge technologies to control all stages of production and increase productivity.

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14 Similar to what happened in Napa Valley, California, on the west coast of the United States, between 2020 and 2021, devastating fires have also hit wine-growing regions in the south of France and Australia. In addition to destroying some wineries, the damage caused by these fires also includes changes in the taste of wine, due to the intensity of the smoke, and long-term effects, such as changes to soil caused by burning. In South America, Latin America's largest wine producer, the land area of Argentina's vineyards has been declining since 2015, reaching 211 kha in 2021. This is a reduction of 3.7 kha, or -1.7% from 2020. The reduction in Argentina's vineyards can be explained by the climatic factors facing its main wine-growing regions, mainly Mendoza, including water shortages, rising temperatures and drought-like conditions. In Chile, on the other hand, the land area of vineyards increased by 1% in 2021 compared to 2020, reaching 210 kha in 2021. After eight straight years of continuous decline, Brazil also increased the land area dedicated to vineyards in 2021, but only marginally, by 0.2%, reaching 81 kha in 2021.

15 Available at: <http://www.oiv.int/en/oiv-life/oiv-2018-report-on-the-world-vitivinicultural-situation> Accessed December 2022.

16 On changes in wine production related to the low levels of grape harvest due to unstable global climatic conditions, see: <http://www.fao.org/3/al176e/al176e.pdf> Accessed December 2022.

17 Particularly considering the global warming that has taken place over the last four years, which has caused a range of events, from cyclones to floods and extreme heat, experts are warning of the urgency of tackling climate change, as it is advancing faster than efforts to curb it. An example of this is the extreme heat that afflicted Europe in June 2019, with the highest temperatures ever recorded on the continent, averaging 2°C above normal. According to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), this is a global trend that tends to become more intense, longer, and more frequent due to the increase in global temperatures caused by greenhouse gas concentrations, the consequences of which involve environmental and human health impacts. Available at: <https://news.un.org/pt/story/2019/07/1678802> Accessed December 2022.

Environmental issues are reshaping the geography of wine, since producers have been looking for growing regions that are less vulnerable to sudden temperature changes<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, in Brazil and other countries much research has focused on developing grape varieties that are more adaptable/resistant to climate change. This includes genetic improvements to wine varieties to make them more resistant to fungi and, consequently, do not require intensive use of agrochemicals. This research may be a step forward, but it doesn't solve all the environmental problems associated with this activity.

It's not hard to see that events related to the climate crisis are progressing very quickly and in almost always unpredictable ways. One example is the recent extreme heat in Europe, where much of the world's wine production is still concentrated<sup>19</sup>. According to the European Climate Change Service, October 2022 had the hottest temperatures ever recorded on the continent for the month, with temperatures almost 2°C above the average of the period from 1991 to 2020<sup>20</sup>.

While the climate crisis has recently had a strong impact on vineyards, it can be affirmed that grapevines have displayed tremendous resilience over their seven millennia of existence. Over the last few centuries in particular, viticulture has faced more intense adversity. The case of phylloxera, which decimated vines in Europe in the 19th century, is still a reference in this sense. Problems such as mildew and oidium, among other fungi, persist as threats to be combated in various regions of the world, including Brazil. And climate change have already left important marks on viticulture as we know it today. Since the period known as the "Little Ice Age" (1300-1850), changes have led to modifications in wine production and trade. Due to temperature decline, viticulture retreated from northern European regions. While sweet wines were developed in the Mediterranean region, in the new frontier areas, such as Champagne, there was a shift from red to white wine production (Campbell; Guibert, 2007).

Although this may suggest the resilience of viticulture to extreme events, the fact is that as the changes related to the emerging climate crisis highlight the unsustainability of the current production model<sup>21</sup>, they also point to the need for a broader re-dimensioning, which includes the implementation of greater circularity in this field.

## Grape and Wine Production, Generation of waste and a Circular Economy

Since ancient times, wine has played a significant social, cultural and economic role<sup>22</sup>. In recent years, in addition to the increase in worldwide demand for this beverage<sup>23</sup>, its production has contributed to a growing number of national economies, including those of several emerging countries, which also means that it generates work and income for many individuals and even families. But as the industry expands, so do its negative socio-environmental impacts. As mentioned, the large volume of waste has been identified as

18 In Bordeaux, France, some winemakers have been using less merlot in their blends, and in Napa Valley, California, there has been a decrease in the use of cabernet sauvignon grapes due to rising temperatures. Available at: <https://gizmodo.uol.com.br/crise-climatica-regioes-vincolas-risco/> Accessed November 25, 22.

19 Available at: <https://news.un.org/pt/story/2019/07/1678802> Accessed 10/October/2022.

20 Available at: <https://www.dw.com/pt-br/europa-teve-neste-ano-o-outubro-mais-quente-já-registrado/a-63687953> Accessed November 15, 2022.

21 When thinking about sustainable agriculture, one can begin with the perspective of Sachs (Sachs, 1990, 2002), for whom sustainability must encompass various dimensions, ranging from the environmental to the social, economic, ecological, territorial, cultural, national political and international political. It is also important to note that in the sphere of agriculture, apart from the preservation of soil and water in particular, orientation towards a more sustainable approach involves minimal use of artificial inputs from outside the agricultural system, the restoration of environmental disturbances caused by cultivation and harvesting, and the establishment of a foundation as an economically and socially viable activity (Gomiero et al., 2011). In addition, the restoration of biodiversity in agricultural landscapes is also considered fundamental in the context of sustainable agriculture, since biodiversity, among other aspects, allows agro-ecosystems to improve both soil fertility and crop protection and productivity. (Altieri, 1999).

22 For a broader view, especially of the economic aspects linked to wine since the past, see: Unwin (1996).

23 For data on the growth of world wine consumption see: "State of the World Vine and Wine Sector 2021", OIV available at: <https://www.oiv.int/public/medias/8778/eng-state-of-the-world-vine-and-wine-sector-april-2022-v6.pdf> Accessed on 20/10/22.

a problem that must be overcome in various contexts. For this reason, the concept of the Circular Economy has become a guiding principle for the reconfiguration of wine production, both in terms of eliminating the impacts mentioned and exploring other related potentials.

Based on the principles of reducing, reusing, refurbishing and recycling materials and energy (the so-called 4 Rs), the Circular Economy is a proposal focused on reconfiguring the current linear economy that is based on the extraction, production and disposal of *natural resources*. The objective is to develop a more circular economic model based on an increased use of renewable energy sources and the continuous reuse of materials/waste, so that they can be kept within the production cycle as long as possible<sup>24</sup>. In this perspective, “waste” is conceived as a “food” that serves as a basic element in regenerative production cycles to generate more positive environmental and social impacts (McDonough, 2002)<sup>25</sup>.

As Weetman (2021) affirms, the impacts of systematic environmental degradation related to the logic of the linear economy (take, make, waste) have led us to “ecological excess”<sup>26</sup>. Today’s economy depends not only on water and land, but also on metals, minerals and fossil fuels, elements that are finite and are wasted when a product is discarded. In addition, it must be recognized that this means that labor and knowledge invested at each stage of the production process are also wasted. The climate emergency, the global crisis, and the recent pandemic accompanied by the shortage and consequent increase in the prices of raw materials revealed the urgent need to seek an economy based on circularity in a wide variety of areas, including the field of wine production.

In recent years, greater focus by companies, institutions, and consumers on the growing environmental problems in the wine industry has led to a proliferation of projects, protocols, and tools to promote greater circularity and sustainability (Christ and Burrit, 2013). Among these strategies is the development of solutions for managing wine production waste.

Wine production generates solid and liquid waste. Solid waste comes from the grape harvest (grape stalks, grape pomace and seeds, leftover packaging, and other sources)<sup>27</sup>. Liquid residues are produced during winemaking (Zacharof, 2017). Their mismanagement, through improper disposal, not only causes socio-environmental damage, but is a form of waste given the many possibilities related to its use.

The main solid waste derived from wine production is grape pomace, which consists of the pulp of the berries, skins, seeds, and stalks. In Brazil, research has been conducted to explore the potential for using this residue<sup>28</sup>. This research has revealed various possibilities for greater circularity in the wine-growing field, since the by-products of wine making can be used in food, supplements, pharmaceuticals and cosmetics, animal feed, fertilizers, bio-inputs, solid and gaseous fuels, energy production, and other industries.

Some countries have advanced policies to implement sustainable practices in wine production, with the objective of creating a more circular economy. Among the world’s leading wine-producing countries, Italy is a case in point. Interviews conducted at wineries in Sicily, in southern Italy, showed that practices aimed at environmental preservation were being revived, based on the notion of a more “natural” viticulture, without the use of agrochemicals, “as in ancient times”.

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24 See: <https://archive.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/pt/economia-circular/conceito>

25 About the idea of garbage as food see: McDonough (2002) and Raworth (2017).

26 Weetman (2021) maintains that the world’s population consumes at the level of 1.75 planets each year and, in the past 50 years, we have caused the degradation of 60% of the Earth’s ecosystems.

27 Grape stalks are the main waste that comes from the grapevines.

28 Some examples of these studies can be found in: EMPRESA BRASILEIRA DE PESQUISA AGROPECUÁRIA - EMBRAPA. BASTOS, A. 2018. Bagaço de uva vira alimentos funcionais. 2018. Available at: <<https://www.embrapa.br/busca-de-noticias/-/noticia/2235712/bagaco-de-uva-vira-alimentos-funcionais>> Accessed Nov. 21, 2022. EMPRESA BRASILEIRA DE PESQUISA AGROPECUÁRIA - EMBRAPA. BASTOS, A. Cientistas desenvolvem produtos com resíduos da indústria vinícola. 19 jun 2018. Available at: <<https://www.embrapa.br/busca-de-noticias/-/noticia/34950363/cientistas-desenvolvem-produtos-com-residuos-da-industria-vinicola>> Accessed Nov. 21, 2022 and Tonon et al. (2018).

As far as waste management is concerned, the country's waste circularity rate is 18.5%, which places it in second place after the Netherlands among countries with advanced waste management policies. In the field of viticulture, Italy's main wine cooperative, which is the largest wine producer by volume in the country, covers 7 regions and includes 12,000 vineyards and wineries. The cooperative is a pioneer in the development of a Circular Economy in the sector and an example of how greater circularity can be achieved in this field, since the cooperative uses all the waste from wine production<sup>29</sup>.

Observing the experience of other countries can also indicate how the production and management of wine-growing waste varies from one context to another. What is considered "garbage" or waste to be disposed of can acquire new meanings and different attributions, since the definition of "garbage" is also permeated by cultural aspects, not necessarily resulting from an objective condition of material culture, but above all from a subjective condition. According to Mary Douglas (1991), waste is not a fixed category of things, but something that results from classification and relationships. Much of what can be conceived as "garbage" or waste is not something that necessarily has no use value or has lost its use value, but rather something that has come to be defined as valueless, i.e. the conditions under which garbage is understood are also culturally determined (Thompson, 2017)<sup>30</sup>.

But the way in which waste is conceived or used can also be linked to the development of policies in this field and, above all, their effective implementation. In 2010, Brazil approved a National Solid Waste Policy (PNRS), whose principles are anchored in circularity, that is, they include encouraging the adoption of sustainable production and consumption patterns<sup>31</sup>. Although it is considered one of world's most advanced legislation in this field and has led to some progress, its results are still considered insignificant in terms of reducing the improper disposal of waste and various obstacles to the implementation of municipal solid waste plans, the correction of sanitary landfills and the condition of waste pickers, among other factors (Dutra, 2021; Mattos, 2021).

Although Brazil is not among the world's top wine producers, the activity has been growing in recent years. The southern regions and the São Francisco Valley account for most of the country's production. Data from the International Organization of Wine and Vine (OIV) shows that in 2021 Brazil produced 3.6 million hectoliters of wine, the highest production since 2008 (+60%). Although not as significant as in other countries or as other agri-food crops grown in the country (sugar cane, coffee, oranges, among others), the figures indicate expansion of this activity. Consequently, they suggest an increase in related socio-environmental impacts and the need to seek more sustainable solutions in this field. As Porto-Gonçalves (2015) observes, the transformation of an ecosystem into an agro-ecosystem will always imply a loss of social and environmental impacts, that is, regardless of the extent of cultivation, agricultural activity will always have some negative impact.

According to the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (Embrapa), the main destinations for grape pomace in Brazil are composting or animal feed (Tonon et al., 2018). Data from this institution shows that only 3% of the total amount of waste generated from wine production in the country is used (Tonon et al., 2018). This indicates that most of this waste in the country is discarded, also indicating that the absence of norms governing the correct management of this waste will inevitably lead to environmental pollution.

From this perspective, an example of the lack of a more circular approach to waste management can be seen in the mountain region of Santa Catarina where viticulture has been developing for some twenty years. Interviews conducted at wineries in this region at the end of 2022, specifically in the municipality of São

29 The waste is used for renewable energy, the lees are transformed into biogas for electricity and heat, the bagasse is also used to produce electricity, polyphenols are extracted from the grape seeds for oenological, food and nutraceutical use; and to produce the natural food coloring encocyanin and tartaric acid for oenological, food, pharmaceutical and construction use. The waste is also used to produce compost for organic crops. Available at: <https://www.caviro.com> Accessed: 12/10/2022.

30 Thompson (2017) also notes that in many non-Western societies, the value attributed to items is much greater after they have been discarded.

31 Available at: [https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/\\_ato2007-2010/2010/lei/l12305.htm](https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2007-2010/2010/lei/l12305.htm) Accessed: Nov. 22, 2022.

Joaquim, revealed that many wine production enterprises still use burning to dispose of vine pruning waste. This causes the emission of greenhouse gases and thus generates socio-environmental impacts. Another problem observed and reported in the interviews carried out in this same region was the lack of separate collection of recyclable materials in São Joaquim, making it difficult to correctly dispose of various types of solid waste resulting from wine production, such as wine bottles.

Wine production depends on several factors. A bottle of wine is the result of human labor, the progressive use of technologies and, above all, certain environmental conditions involving soil, climate, water and a good interaction between these elements and ecological processes. Guiding activities in the wine-growing field towards a more sustainable and circular approach involves not only addressing current needs, but also guaranteeing the very continuity of this activity.

## Final considerations

Wine growing has been expanding around the world. Technological advances have led to changes in production, consumption and the way it is stored, transported and marketed<sup>32</sup>. Investments in technology have made it possible to grow vineyards in unprecedented areas such as deserts in Israel and China, and arid regions of Brazil such as the Lower-Middle São Francisco valley, in the *sertão*, and the Cerrado, reshaping the wine-growing landscape in the country.

Although there are still small and medium-sized initiatives with a more artisanal structure, wine has also become a product of big business, produced on a large scale, and distributed globally. As the growing industrialization of wine production has changed wine consumption, leading to breaking down of cultural boundaries, it has also raised a series of questions, specifically regarding impacts on the environment and human health. Under the current agricultural model, which is guided by intensive production methods that are socio-environmentally predatory, wine production has raised concerns and revealed the need for alternative methods, especially those that can achieve greater circularity in this field<sup>33</sup>.

Loss of biodiversity, air and water pollution, progressive soil degradation, intense generation of waste, as well as impacts on human health, whether of rural workers or consumers, and intensification of climate change are some of the problems associated with contemporary agriculture. Wine-growing practices date back to the distant past, yet as they have been perpetuated, intensified, and industrialized, they have contributed to the problems mentioned. Thus, the need to reconfigure this field has become increasingly urgent. Therefore, thinking about wine involves much more than its organoleptic aspects, it requires recognizing that as technologies have modified the various production stages, this age-old beverage is still dependent on both human action and the environmental conditions that make its materiality possible.

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<sup>32</sup> There have been global changes in wine consumption in recent years, according to the International Organization of Vine and Wine (OIV). Between 2000 and 2017 wine began to be consumed outside the country in which it is produced. The organization's world wine report for 2019 points to a downward trend (or stagnation) in the main consumer countries, while consumption rose in new regions, especially in Asian countries. Available at: <http://www.oiv.int/en/oiv-life/oiv-2018-report-on-the-world-vitivinicultural-situation> Accessed January 2020.

<sup>33</sup> In 2018, the International Organization of Vine and Wine (OIV), responsible for promoting viticulture on a global scale, included in its recommendations to its various national member bodies, including Brazil, the importance of observing more sustainable practices guided by: a global strategy on the scale of grape production and processing systems that simultaneously incorporate the economic sustainability of structures and territories to produce quality products, considering precise requirements in sustainable wine growing, environmental risks, product safety and consumer health, and valuing heritage, historical, cultural, ecological and landscape aspects.

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# Repair cafés in the Netherlands: Capitalist abstinence as a challenge to a linear capitalist economy

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## **Abstract**

Repair cafés have become a common phenomenon in the Netherlands and some other European countries. In repair cafés, owners of broken objects and volunteer-repairers meet to try to salvage broken appliances. While their economic effect is negligible, repair cafés are a small step towards attaining a circular economy because they motivate their visitors to lead more sustainable lives. By extending the life-cycle of objects, by refusing payment and by criticizing producers who frustrate repair by impractical design, customers and volunteers challenge the capitalist mode of production.

**Key words:** community repair, circular economy, planned obsolescence, extension of product life, capitalist abstinence, moral consumption.

# Repair cafés na Holanda: a abstinência capitalista como um desafio para uma economia capitalista linear

## Resumo

Os repair cafés tornaram-se um fenómeno comum na Holanda e em alguns outros países europeus. Nos repair cafés, proprietários de objetos quebrados e voluntários que se propõem a consertar os objetos se reúnem para tentar resgatar eletrodomésticos quebrados. Embora o seu efeito económico seja insignificante, os repair cafés são um pequeno passo no sentido de alcançar uma economia circular porque motivam os seus visitantes a levar vidas mais sustentáveis. Ao prolongar o ciclo de vida dos objectos, ao recusar o pagamento e ao criticar os produtores que frustram a reparação através de um design impraticável, os clientes e voluntários desafiam o modo de produção capitalista.

**Palavras-chave:** reparação comunitária, economia circular, obsolescência planejada, extensão da vida útil do produto, abstinência capitalista, consumo moral.

# Repair cafés in the Netherlands: Capitalist abstinence as a challenge to a linear capitalist economy

*Freek Colombijn and Precious Egboko*

## **Introduction**

The demand for professional repair services has decreased in Europe and, indeed, at first sight repair of broken objects goes against the logic of the ‘short innovation cycles, the rapid turn-over of products, and ideas of planned or designed obsolescence’ of a consumer society (Van der Velden, 2021: 2, 8). For producers, it is more profitable to have customers replace broken objects by the purchase of new ones and for consumers it is more expedient to accept this option. Time is money and spending time on a repair with an uncertain outcome is often assessed as uneconomical by both consumers and producers.

However, as Anna Bohlin (2019: 1) has argued, over the last few decades, ‘the consumerist ideology that has long privileged disposable products and newness has been increasingly challenged by ideas and practices which proclaim the benefits of more responsible and less environmentally harmful kinds of consumption’. In 2007 Nicky Gregson, Alan Metcalfe and Louise Crewe already argued that the term ‘throwaway society’ to designate the UK (and presumably other European countries) was empirically proven to be inappropriate; people simply preferred to sell, barter or donate objects rather than disposing of them as waste. Repair is an essential element in people’s efforts to get responsible forms of consumption and avoid disposing of broken objects.

The incongruity of a demand for affordable repair with a market that has made repair prohibitively expensive may partly be solved by new forms of community repair, such as repair cafés. Maja van der Velden defines community repair as ‘a citizen-driven, locally organised public event, in which volunteer repairers and people with an object in need of repair are matched’ (Van der Velden, 2021: 1). Rikke Marie Moalem and Mette Alberg Mosgaard (2021: 2) speak of an emerging ‘community repair movement’. Repair cafés are one form of community repair. Repair cafés are meeting places to which people can come to try to have broken objects repaired with the help of volunteers against no or limited payment. If the repairs were to be done by a business, their costs would not have warranted reparation and the owner of the object would in all likelihood throw the broken object away.

Several authors have discussed the potential role of community repair in the transition to a circular economy (Bradley & Persson, 2022; Moalem & Mosgaard, 2021; Niskanen & McLaren, 2023; Van der Velden, 2021). In a neoclassical approach to the market economy, production is a unidirectional process in which resources enter the production process and products come out of it; when objects are no longer functioning properly or have become obsolete, they are discarded. In a circular economy, this open, unidirectional process becomes a closed loop in which the economy ultimately no longer extracts more resources from the environment (Andersen, 2007; George et al., 2015; Ghisellini et al., 2016: 24). Julian Kirchherr, Denise Reike and Marko Hekkert (cited by Bradley & Persson, 2022: 3) define a circular economy as ‘an economic system that is based on business models which replace the “end-of-life” concept with reducing, alternatively reusing, recycling and recovering materials in production/distribution and consumption processes’.

Admittedly, repair is not enough for attaining a circular economy, because it does not feed resources back into the production process. Nevertheless, the ‘extension of product life’ slows down the ‘resource loop’ (Moalem & Mosgaard, 2021: 3), because repair keeps materials in use for longer, and uses less energy and less other resources than new production (see also Van der Velden, 2021: 1-2). The circular economic framework identifies three practical approaches to waste management: prevention of the generation of waste, reuse, and recycling as a zero-waste strategy. Isenhour and Reno (2019) in their overview of ethnographic engagement with reuse and repair, recognize the significance of repair as a practice preventing waste (see also Genovese et al., 2017 and Eckert, Rial & Colombijn, 2020).

Unfortunately, as Johan Niskanen and Duncan McLaren (2023: 3) contend, most academic literature on repair and the circular economy ‘is remarkably technocratic and largely devoid of political analysis. Circularity and, within that, [...] repair are presented as opportunities for a “win-win” outcome, in which economic and sustainability gains run hand in hand’. Also the European Union presents a transition to a circular economy as an economic opportunity and not an environmental necessity. The European Commission (cited by Arisi, 2020: 61) optimistically states that the transition to a circular economy will ‘boost global competitiveness, foster sustainable economic growth and generate new jobs’.

To counter such technocratic and growth-oriented approach, Niskanen and McLaren make a plea for an analysis rooted in political economy, studying who stands to lose and to gain from repair, or a study of the ‘politics of repair’ (Bradley & Persson, 2022: 2). A ‘right-to-repair’ movement has stand up against industry in the last few years, in which consumers demand ‘the right to repair the products they buy, that products should be designed so that they can be easily repaired, and that spare parts and repair manuals should be freely available’ (Bradley & Persson, 2022: 1). Also the European Commission mentions the citizens’ right to repair in its policy documents, and in response manufacturers, defending their own interests are actively lobbying ‘to restrict repair rights’ (Van der Velden, 2021: 2).

We have studied repair cafés in the Netherlands as a possible force to counter corporate interests to discourage repair. The activities at the repair café conflict with hegemonic capitalist logic, in which the exchange value of objects dominates the use value. The repair café not only contradicts capitalist logic by investing time in salvaging broken (and therefore almost valueless) objects but also distinguishes itself from most capitalist practices by the strong community feeling, which breaks the strict division between producer and consumer or between service provider and client. The question we want to address in this article is: How do repair cafés in the Netherlands operate and to what extent do they challenge the hegemonic linear capitalist economic system?

We propose to call the behaviour of the volunteer-repairers and the people bringing objects in need of repair a form of capitalist abstinence. We define capitalist abstinence as a mild form of critique in which people very much embrace the value of consumer items, but in a practical manner refuse to go along with the capitalist logic of the infinite expansion of production and the concomitant need of ongoing new purchases by consumers. With capitalist abstinence people neither reject, nor openly attack the capitalist system as, for instance, a movement like Extinction Rebellion does. The concept of capitalist abstinence is reminiscent of James Scott’s *Weapons of the weak*, in which people do not openly confront the rise of capitalism either, but they do see through the logic of capitalism, try to make a mockery of the capitalist ideology and aim to minimize the negative effects for themselves (Scott, 1985). In this article we hope to show in more detail what such capitalist abstinence entails in the case of repair cafés.

Following Maja van der Velden, we have adopted a sociomaterial perspective, referring ‘to the idea that materiality takes on meaning in its entanglement with social phenomena’. If repair is only analysed in its material manifestation the political aspect will be ignored. The sociomaterial perspective ‘brings out its politics and economics’. In the proposed sociomaterial perspective, repair is considered a value-based activity,

reflecting a variety of values, such as economic or sentimental values, but also professional pride, community, sense of achievement, and care for people and planet (Van der Velden, 2021: 3).

There are, of course, more forms of informal repair, like self-repair and solutions offered on Internet. Moreover, there are more practices that avert the purchase of new products, which range from freely giving away used materials with the description 'gratis' to purchasing second-hand artefacts, and selling and buying goods on 'Marktplaats', a popular online trading platform, on which many people exchange used objects at a relatively low price. We leave these other forms out of consideration now and focus on repair cafés.

## Methodology

Data on the repair café practices were collected by a combination of participant observation, interviews with open questions, online sources and document analysis. The field study was conducted in the repair cafés of Tilburg (Egboko) and Voorschoten (Colombijn). The locations were chosen because of convenience, near the residences of the fieldworkers. Tilburg is a city with over 200,000 residents, by Dutch standards a middle-sized city. It used to have a big textile industry but, when this industrial activity moved to countries with lower production costs, the city diversified its economy to services and higher education. Voorschoten (25,000 residents) is a residential area for mostly (upper-) middle-class people, working elsewhere.

Fieldwork was done intermittently from 2020 to 2022. The opportunity to do participant observation was, apart from our other commitments, constrained by the rhythm of opening days (once a month), and temporary Corona lockdowns. It therefore became all the more important to collect additional information in documents obtained from some repair café locations, revealing the most frequently repaired objects and repair success rate. In January 2021, when the Netherlands were still in lockdown, we extended our research to online communications, seeing how on social media repair cafés integrated their repair practices with ideological statements. This process involved the search for Instagram accounts of repair cafés across other locations, making use of what was most easily accessible, expanding our research beyond Tilburg and Voorschoten. We also conducted a remote one-on-one interview session with a participant while still in the pandemic situation.

Participant observation enabled us to socialize with the group, learning *in situ* their way of talking about and dealing with the broken objects. Both Egboko and Colombijn took broken objects for repair to gain an insider perspective into how customers feel when their items are repaired. Participant observation blended with casual talks. Most of the repairers liked talking in their work environment at the repair café, but some of our interlocutors preferred to meet for an interview in a neutral public space. Interviewing repairers at the repair café had the advantage of watching participants at work, asking questions to make sense of the repair practices and their motivations. We interviewed in total seventeen participants, paying attention to the context and meanings of what the people said and how they said it.

## The idea behind repair cafés

The first repair café event was organized by Martine Postma in Amsterdam in 2009. The event, initially meant as a once only, was such a success that she established a foundation (*Stichting Repair Café*) to organize repair cafés on a regular basis. The foundation helps people to launch local initiatives and the movement has spread from the Netherlands to Belgium, Germany and then to more European countries, the US, Canada, Brazil, Ghana, India, Japan, Australia and other countries outside Europe. The foundation offers a handbook with practical tips on how to set up a new repair café, and the logo to be used in external communication.

The biggest number is still found in the Netherlands where the concept has been firmly established and is widely known in society.<sup>1</sup>

In very accessible language, the website of the foundation explains the rationale behind the repair cafés. People throw away a lot, including items with which there is nothing amiss and which could be easily repaired. Unfortunately, many people no longer think about the possibility of repairing objects or no longer know how to do it. The old skills for repairing objects are rapidly disappearing: ‘People who do have the practical expertise to repair are not always highly valued by society or have been shunted aside against their own wishes. Their experience is hardly used, if at all.’<sup>2</sup> The repair café restores the social standing of these people with repair skills and allows them participate in society; practical skills are transferred to other people during the events.

At first glance, the repair café seems to aim at helping skilled people who have been side-lined by society, but this should not detract from the focus on the objects: objects are used for a longer period and do not need to be discarded. The resources and energy necessary to produce new objects are saved and, just as importantly: the volume of carbon dioxide produced both during the production and the recycling of products is diminished. In a nutshell, the repair café teaches people to take a fresh look at their objects and rediscover the value of their possessions. The repair café contributes to a change in mentality which is ‘needed to make people enthusiastic about a sustainable society’.<sup>3</sup>

In its respect for old, half-forgotten skills, the repair cafés seem to be a nostalgic, backward-looking organization but, in their approach to making objects reusable, as alternative to new production or the recycling of the material, they are progressive. With the growing societal interest in a circular economy, old patterns of behaviour in repair and reuse are becoming fashionable and institutionalized again. A study by the European Commission shows that repair can increase the average life-expectancy of objects, for instance, a washing-machine (six years), dishwasher (six years), coffee machines (four years) and a vacuum cleaner (four years) (International Resource Panel, 2018: 60). The maintenance and lengthened use of objects can conserve economic resources and reduce the frequency with which waste ends up on the landfill and also reduces pressure on recycling facilities.

While the practice of repair looks good on paper, it does require more effort to maintain the continued use of valued items. Some of our informants talked about how they noticed a slower functioning of their valued items after updating the software of gadgets; forcing them to replace a functioning mobile phone or laptop. Another obstacle to the prolonged use of goods is the rapidity with which they become outdated in combination with inaccessibility to their spare parts. King et al. (2006) distinguish between functional obsolescence, the physical and sudden default of items in use, which might be undone by a repair café, and planned obsolescence, the introduction of new trends in the market with added features. For instance, with the launch of a new type of iPhone, suddenly earlier types appear ‘old’, ‘cheap’ and limited. Repair cafés do not offer a solution for this planned obsolescence as market strategy.

Another feature of the market economy which negatively affects the practice of repair relates to the high cost of repair service in regular shops. As a result, individuals prefer to hand over their prized possessions to second-hand dealers for reuse or throw them away rather than bear the high cost of repair. Most of our young informants, between seventeen to thirty years of age, said it is a societal norm that damaged items are frequently thrown out because of the ease with which a replacement can be purchased at a relatively low price. John Urry (2010) refers to this era as one characterized by accelerated consumption as an inherent trace of modernity in the capitalist economic system. We will now first present one case of a repair before discussing the various aspects of repair cafés thematically.

1 <https://www.repaircafé.org>, accessed 25 July 2021.

2 The original quotations on this website are in Dutch. <https://www.repaircafé.org>, accessed 25 July 2021.

3 [www.repaircafé.org](http://www.repaircafé.org), accessed 25 July 2021.

## A broken hedge trimmer

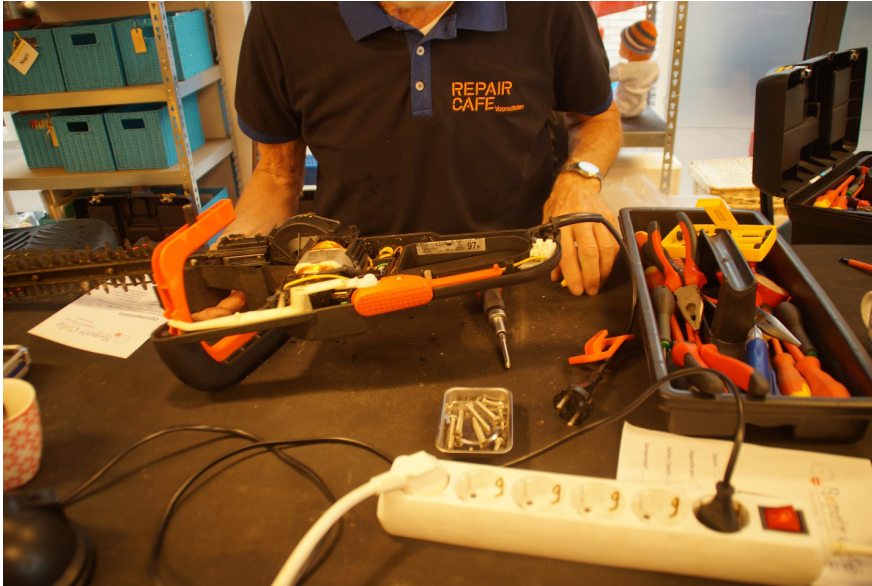
Although gaining access to the repair café communities has never been a problem for us, one of us (Colombijn) sent an email to the volunteer coordinator to ask formal permission to take photographs. I arrived just before opening time and through the window I saw the volunteers drinking coffee together, but by the time I had locked my bike and entered the building, all volunteers were at their post. They had been well informed by the coordinator during the coffee: *'You are the Freek'* were the words with which I was welcomed.

The repair café consists of three rooms which give access to each other without doors: a reception room, a large room for the repair of objects, and a smaller room with sewing machines to repair textiles. A fourth room for bicycle repairs is situated across a passageway, but is practically empty. The large room of about fifteen metres length is dominated by a long worktable with the repairers sitting on one side and clients on the other side. Multiple sockets, open boxes with tools and table lamps are lying or standing on the table along its full length. More tools can be found in racks along the walls and handicrafts decorate the empty space on the walls.

I brought a failing hedge trimmer to break the ice and being the first customer of the day I was helped immediately after I had registered at the reception desk. My job was assigned to 'Jake' (not his real name), and his neighbour who was yet idle, got involved as well. *'It no longer goes like "chaka-chaka-chak"*, they jested, imitating the sound of an old television advert for Black and Decker hedge trimmers. They listened to my explanation and tested the trimmer by moving the electricity cord up and down at the point it entered the machine. Then Jake started to unscrew and they continued joking that sometimes after a repair was done, they discovered some screws had not been placed back in position. *'If not essential, we throw them away'*. The two repairers continued discussing the repairs, also when the neighbour had begun his own job, a vacuum cleaner.

After Jake had opened the trimmer, he told me about the interior and pointed at little coils which *'easily shoot away and are difficult to keep in position'*. He placed the trimmer on his side and asked me to keep it in its position, but apart from this little service, no activity was required from me. Although it seemed rather obvious that the electricity cord did not make contact at one point, Jake appeared set on employing an ampere meter at several spots in the machine. He later also demonstrated his expertise by explicating the function of different screwdrivers, sometimes using for me new, incomprehensible words. He explained the good practice of first screwing anti-clockwise until a screw fell into place with a click, before screwing it down. Despite his knowledge, his first attempt failed, so that the trimmer had to be opened again for a second, this time successful, attempt at repair. I suspect that this his 'trial-and-error and tinkering [...] repair strategy' (Van der Velden, 2021: 8), was unconsciously a way to extend the time for showing off his skills (Figure 1). His neighbour had a similar manner of demonstrating his expertise, giving a technical exposé to his client about the special qualities of an electricity cord curled up in a vacuum cleaner. Pleased with Jake's work and thankful for his stories, I happily forgave his slightly conceited manner.

**Figure 1** - A hedge trimmer under repair



After the repair was done I donated ten euro in an open cash box at the reception desk as a voluntary contribution. Later I was told that the donations amount to 100-150 euro per opening day.

With the exception of one young client, all customers and volunteers looked in their sixties or older and were neatly dressed; the males were clean shaven or had nicely trimmed beards, most women wore make-up. Jake told me that he had enjoyed a technical education at his youth, started his career as a mechanic, but then moved on to management functions. After his retirement he loved working with his hands again. The neighbour with whom Jake was joking was in his seventies and was there together with his wife. The latter was sister-in-law of the coordinator, who in her turn worked at the repair café together with a brother of hers. Also non-kin interacted in a convivial atmosphere. The above case is exemplary of the interactions we have repeatedly observed in Tilburg and Voorschoten.

### **The repair café proceedings<sup>4</sup>**

The repair cafés of Tilburg and Voorschoten open once a month: the repair café in Tilburg every first Thursday evening of the month (19:00-21:00) and Voorschoten every last Saturday of the month (10:00-17:00). Although the decentralized organization of repair cafés in the Netherlands allows individual cafés to set their own opening hours independently, they have coordinated their opening hours with other repair cafés in the region. The variation in the days of operation facilitates complementary repair service opportunities and alternatives for participants to opt for a repair café in a neighbouring city, if a customer by any chance misses a repair date in their hometown. In another form of collaboration, every once a month, the repair café organization sets up a meeting at which different repair café unit coordinators are represented. This monthly conference is essential to measure their performance, reinforce their culture and focus on repair support missions and environmental awareness, among other related goals.

At the repair café, repairers meet customers and tools meet damaged items in a marketplace of material restoration.<sup>5</sup> Customers are handed out a tag number when they enter and report the kind of broken object they have brought with them at a reception desk. They then wait for their tag number to come up and approach

<sup>4</sup> For a fine description of the proceedings at another repair café in the Netherlands, see Van der Velden (2021), which lends credence to our analysis.

<sup>5</sup> This description has found inspiration from Actor-Network-Theory (O'Hare, 2019: 8).



the repairers specialized in the particular kind of repairs. Maintaining order is necessary to ensure a smooth operation for the sake of punctuality.

Both in Tilburg and, as we have already seen, in Voorschoten, the repairers are seated in a central space with the clients circling around them. The seating arrangement results in a face-to-face setting which allows repairers to ask the customers about their objects' biographies and the possible root cause of the damage. The sitting pattern enables collaboration and mutual learning: the repairer learns about the object and the customers learn about the technique. Most of the customers appear in the role of an apprentice, and the repairers show their competence and mastery in repair practice.

The repairers have a peculiar attachment to their instruments –knives, screw-drivers, needles, etcetera–, which they keep with them as personal items (Figure 1). In most cases, repair instruments are not exchanged but individually owned by each repairer, but the repair coordinators also make additional tools available. Repairers are uncertain without their repair tools just as the equipment is ineffective outside the repairer's hand. Therefore, knowing the repair equipment by name, its function and knowing how it feels in the hand add flair and precision in handling the tools. Understanding the relationship with the tool comes with timeless, constant practice. A repairer develops a certain close intimacy with the repair tool through continued practice in 'a process of mutual becoming' (Sørhaug, 2021: 367); in itself, this relationship between repairer and tool already goes against the logic of a throwaway society.

One step at a time, the repairer develops confidence in trusting the tool in his hands and discovers new tricks, standardizing processes which solve imminent technical difficulties. The explanation of Jake how he starts screwing counter-clockwise until the screw falls in place with a click is a case in point. Dant describes the type of interaction existing between humans and the objects in their physical environment as the concept of 'affordance' (Dant, 2004: 64). He asserts that the tool by itself is a dead object, but it does allow the repairer to repair a broken object. The repairer must discover how to use the tools, sometimes in unintended ways (unintended by the producer of the tool).

An important element in the repair is the social activity. The website of the Repair Café foundation emphasizes that the repair café forms a 'community' (the English term is also used in the Dutch language communication): 'Repair cafés are *free meetings* which revolve around repairing (*together*). Tools and materials to carry out all sorts of repairs are available on site [...]. Visitors bring broken objects from home. At the repair café they set to work together with the experts. [...] Those persons who have nothing to be repaired can *enjoy a cup of coffee or tea* or they [...] can always find some inspiration at the reading table on which there are books about repairs.'<sup>6</sup> The tone of the website is the tone of capitalist abstinence without a sign of overt anti-capitalism: here the capitalist maxim 'time is money' does not count and the economic activity of repair is for free. The webpage with information about the repair cafés ends with the joyful exclamation: 'Above all the Repair Café wants to show that repairing is fun and often quite easy. Come and give it a try yourself!'<sup>7</sup>

The social aspect of the repair café activities were immediately apparent during our visits. For instance, during Egboko's first visit to the repair café in Tilburg, the event hall was a warm setting offering the individuals coming in from the cold winter comfort, while a clock on the wall ticked, keeping account of the time spent. Individuals exchanged pleasantries with warm greetings, shaking hands and sipping coffee. This first time, the fieldworker seated himself gingerly on a repairer's chair for a second, unaware of the proper procedure, until a volunteer with a cheerful smile redirected him to the visitors' seats in the middle. The differentiation between visitors and repairers whose specific competence is underlined by reserved, privileged seating had to be maintained, but in a friendly manner (Figure 2).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.repaircafé.org>, accessed 25 July 2021, our italics.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.repaircafé.org>, accessed 25 July 2021.

**Figure 2** - Separated spaces for expert repairers and customers



There was a sense of togetherness in the meetings. Everyone had come for a common purpose: to prolong their objects' lifecycle with the offering of free service from the volunteer repairers which gave customers the satisfaction that their valued object was being restored. While the volunteers could have earned a considerable sum for their effort, the repair café practices appeared to be free of monetary value: the participants collaborated and shared their unique talents with the aim of extending the use of objects through the repair effort.

Social interaction between reparer and client is essential in the process. For instance, we observed a customer who came with a damaged lamp. She explained that the lamp would not switch on when she pressed the button; the lamp had suddenly stopped working but she had no idea what the fault could be. After listening to the problem, the usual answer of the reparer was that no guarantee of success could be given, but there was the possibility of salvaging the lamp with their effort and skill. Maja van der Velden also stresses the importance of these conversations between reparer and customer: 'information was exchanged on the basis of questions asked by the reparer [...] During the repair information was exchanged that was not directly related to the repair, but which provided more context to the product [...] used in the house, how it was used and how often, family histories with the product, and its sentimental value'. In their turn 'the repairers showed the owners problematic issues with the design of the product, such as products that are difficult to open [...] and plastic parts that are not robust enough for everyday use' (Van der Velden, 2021: 7).

The social interaction among the repairers and coordinators of the repair café is even more important. The repairers regularly consult each other on difficult cases (Figure 2). Moreover, the donations from clients are used not only for the maintenance or replacement of tools and spare parts, but are also spent on a get-together at certain times to celebrate their achievements, both in Tilburg and Voorschoten. The older participants have long-established friendships or are, in Voorschoten, kin and quite a few had worked at the repair cafés since their respective opening. The bonding resulted in a corporate identity. For instance, most volunteers in Voorschoten were wearing a sweater with the logo of the Voorschoten repair-café. They proudly contrasted the interaction between repairers and customers in Voorschoten with the repair café in the nearby elite village, Wassenaar, where clients could leave their broken objects behind for repair, but were not expected to stay during the effort.

Customers could also become regulars and sometimes they reported to have waited patiently for the monthly opening time of the repair café. One couple in Tilburg, for example, had temporarily switched to boiling water in a saucepan in the hope that their electronic water cooker could be repaired and suspended the

purchase of a new cooker until they had at least given the repair a try at the monthly opening. In Voorschoten the absence of a mother and daughter was noted as striking, *'because they are here every month'*.

Again, the limited opening hours of the repair cafés are not a radical critique of capitalism, but they are a form of capitalist abstinence. In a capitalist society, services are ideally available 24/7. If people want to reverse the 'overheating' (Eriksen, 2016) of society and to abstain from purchasing the newest model electronic water cooker, they will have to show patience and wait until the next opening day of the repair café.

## **The people of the repair café communities**

Most of the repair café participants are at least fifty or over and many elderly members are retirees, a fact also noted by Barbara Arisi (2020: 79). There is a clear gender differentiation, with the majority of male repairers concentrating on electronic gadgets, while repairing clothes was the responsibility of women. The women also assisted in making coffee, so the division of labour was very traditional (perhaps partly as a result of the relatively advanced age of the repairers). The collective participation in the repair café creates an event to which most of the participants come to have their item restored while enjoying each other's company. As a retiree some volunteers see an opportunity to contribute to society with their time, skillset and dedication. Their socio-economic status as retirees perhaps makes working for monetary reward unnecessary; instead, they see the act of volunteering in the practice of repair as fun. Moreover, they have the time that a repair usually takes. When a retiree, no longer in formal employment, feels discarded by society, the repair café saves both discarded objects and discarded persons.

The repairers and clients are not only of a certain age category, but also as belong to a certain generation. They connect to a specific era in which repairs were still commonplace in households. Several participants recalled how they had watched their parents, grandparents and other family relations engage in repair activities in their childhood. They acquired the fundamental knowledge about fixing objects by observing, asking questions, participating and familiarizing themselves with the tools and tricks of repair practice. Unintentionally they copied the division of tasks seen in their adolescence, with women sewing or mending clothes, and men were described as handy at fixing things.

The volunteers were aware of and quite explicit about the generational differences. Discussing another frugal practice, keeping leftovers in the fridge for the next day, one volunteer in Voorschoten, now in her seventies, quoted her mother when the latter would rebuke people who threw away food: *'Darling, I can see you have not experienced the [Second World] War'*. Another volunteer grumbled that her fifty-year old daughter had barely begun separating household waste and *'knew nothing about sustainability'*. Nevertheless, she also varnished over the younger generation's absence from the repair café: her grown-up children did not have time for the repair café, because on Saturdays they have to accompany their own children (the volunteer's grandchildren) to their sports clubs.

Individuals found out about the repair café from their immediate circles of friends and family. In other words, the repair cafés attracted both repairers and customers through traditional forms of communication and connection. Although the conventional network functions efficiently, the mouth-to-mouth communication still appears to exclude the younger people, despite the significance of free repair services for them. In our view, this should be a point of concern: how and why could the repair café practices attract younger age participants using communication channels more appropriate to this generation?

The repair café community states the event is open to everyone; yet, the younger people appear to be either few and far between or entirely absent from the practice, despite the sumptuous guarantee of free object renewal services. Talking to some of the younger people living close to the repair café location but who had never attended an event, we got the impression that most of them did not know about the activities. There

were even less young volunteers than clients; in Voorschoten there had been two, among whom the son of a Syrian refugee family, but both stayed away after a while.

The apparent indifference of younger people to the repair café practices might be caused by the channel of information dissemination, by the age disparity which makes younger people less at ease when they enter the convivial atmosphere of the gatherings, or it might be because of a different habitus. Pierre Bourdieu uses the word habitus to explain that individuals are likely to have been conditioned to perform in specific ways aligning interests with their shared experience (1990). When individuals share such attributes of historical events, trends, belief, culture, and ideology, the experience constitutes their collective sense of reality. Seeing repair as a feasible, and perhaps the preferred, way of dealing with a broken object is part of the habitus of older generations, but not younger people.

## The presence on social media

Wondering whether social media would be the means to attract more people from a younger generation to repair cafés, we directed our focus to the repair café community's performance on such media platforms as Instagram. In January 2021, we followed the activities of three Dutch repair cafés on Instagram; we repeated the search in August 2021 to get some quantitative data on followers. The cafés were selected as we happened to find them and in no way do we pretend to give a systematic random sample of Instagram accounts of repair cafés. However, our findings do give an indication of their presence on Instagram. Six accounts had an average of 197 followers, with a maximum of 566 followers and a minimum of 1. Given the limited Instagram accounts we could find, compared to the total number of repair cafés, we assume that many cafés are not interested in this medium at all.

Incidentally we also erroneously selected an Instagram account that, we discovered later, belonged to a repair café in Germany. Although situated in another country (with, for instance, different regulations pertaining to discarding old objects which might affect the use of repair cafés), it is worthwhile citing this case as an illuminating counter-example to the repair café in Tilburg and Voorschoten. The German repair café had 818 followers on Instagram, far more than any of the Dutch cafés. How can the difference be explained?

The German repair café was based close to a university and the followers on Instagram were mostly young students. We held an online interview with the coordinator, who was himself thirty-three years old and who had learned his repair skills from his grandfather, whom he joined on tours gathering scrap which could be resold after repair. The coordinator told that most of the items brought for repair were laptops, iPhones, coffee machines, bicycles, game cursors, headsets, DVD players and other electronic gadgets typically popular among students (probably with the exception of DVD players). He told they are the only repair café opening throughout the week on the basis of individual appointments, hence suiting the rhythm of busy students. He explained that the students want to maximize the limited time they have and making appointments is convenient and allows the customers flexibility. The popularity with a younger group, reflected in the unusually large number of Instagram followers, can therefore be explained by the *modus operandi* which caters to people who have more commitments than most retired people might have. The communication on social media went both ways and a grateful customer sent them a video saying; 'You [the repairer] are my hero'. The repair café posted the video on its Instagram account and then went viral. On the basis of the German example we may conclude that the channel of communication indeed matters when it comes to attracting younger clientele.

Unfortunately, the success of this German repair café came at a price because it struggled to mobilize enough volunteers, who were also younger than their counterparts in the two Dutch repair cafés. A notable concern of this repair café community involves the inconsistent commitments by the younger repairers, especially when most volunteers have to balance their free repair service with proper jobs engagements from

which they earn their income. Sometimes there are only few repairers and at other times there is a crowd because the younger volunteers cannot always come.

The upsurge in attention from younger clients at this German repair café came to a halt when the repair café temporarily stopped working during the corona lockdown. However, the repairers continued collecting laptops and computers to be mended. The repaired computers were donated to children who needed them for schooling, especially at a time in which schooling in Germany switched to online, distance education (and not all families could afford a laptop). In this instance, the social motivation took precedence over the environmental motivation of the volunteers.

The importance of different means of communication can hardly be overestimated. While the older people's navigation across repair practice is by word of mouth, snowballing as it goes, the younger people come to repair cafés communicating through trends on social media platforms. One of the coordinators in his late fifties gave his opinion about using social media: *'Here in our repair café, we are not interested in or use social media. I'm not too fond of it. Our way of doing things might be old fashioned, but it saves me a lot of trouble, energy and time [by not going to social media]'*. He recalled another repair café which resorted to mass publicity of a particular repair café event on social media, in a local newspaper and on other platforms. There was a massive turnout on the scheduled day, attracting so many visitors that it was beyond the capacity of the volunteers-repairers to handle. Most of the visitors were sent away without a repair even being attempted.

## The objects at repair cafés

Despite the importance of the social aspect, the main activity was repairing objects and the repair cafés did this quite successfully. Figures for 2019 provided by the repair café foundation show the success rate of the repairs is high: 63 percent of the objects is fully repaired and 13 percent half repaired; in 24 percent of the cases repair was not possible. The success rate differs from product to product: high for non-electronic goods like trousers (96%) and bicycles (84%). Electric equipment like sewing machines (69%), lamps (68%) and vacuum cleaners (63%) have a somewhat lower, but still considerable success rate. At the bottom are coffee-makers (55%) and computers, laptops and mobile phones (45%).<sup>8</sup> These figures show that, even for the more difficult objects to repair, a visit to a repair café is worth a try.

There are several reasons some objects are more difficult to repair than others. Repairers find it challenging to repair the old devices because of the unavailability of spare parts as well as rust in nuts. Spare parts are sometimes ordered but this implies the reparation will have to wait till the next time the repair café opens and the customer must be willing to pay the costs of purchasing the spare parts. As for the task of finding spare parts, a fruitful symbiosis exists between the repair café in Tilburg and the adjacent thrift shop which offers the repair café work space and support. Objects offered to the thrift shop which are classified as irreparable can sometimes be disassembled for spare parts which the repair café can use to build a whole item. Conversely broken items which are beyond repair and which are left behind at the repair café by clients can sometimes be used to upgrade half-broken objects for reuse in an upscaling process.

Most of the repairers we talked to complained about the limited access to quality replacement parts because the inability to find a similar broken component can cause the whole item to be discarded. Fortunately, the European Commission has taken measures to set limits on built-in obsolescence of manufacturers. Accessibility to spare parts has become a significant factor in design. Sustainable designs which take accessibility to spare parts into account align with European eco-design directives (2009/125/EC), implemented in 2021.

<sup>8</sup> [https://repaircafé.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/05/RepairMonitor\\_analysis\\_2019\\_05052020\\_ENGLISH.pdf](https://repaircafé.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/05/RepairMonitor_analysis_2019_05052020_ENGLISH.pdf)

The European directive encourages manufacturers to develop repair-friendly product designs and to make spare parts and information accessible for specific energy-related commodities like dishwashers, coffee machines, and refrigerators (Rodríguez Quintero et al., 2021).

Arguably the biggest challenge posed by the planned obsolescence is not finding spare parts but opening the object to get access to the inner compartments (see also Van der Velden, 2021: 2). As one exasperated repairer said: *'If we try to open the object forcibly, it might get broken, hence, when this happens, we have no option but to leave the object [unrepaired and] throw it away'*. Many of the repairers claim that most of the time the faults identified in electronic equipment are no more than a burnt cable or some other minor technical fault, but the complexity in design makes it difficult to open and repair. As an experienced repairer told Barbara Arisi about the electronic appliances: *"They mainly are glued, so it is almost impossible to open an electronic utensil up without destroying it"* (Arisi, 2020: 80).

The inability to open an object can give rise to enormous frustration. In Voorschoten we observed how three volunteers by every means in their power tried in turn to open a vacuum cleaner but, to their exasperation, could find no way other than by smashing the covering. This failure was a blow to their professional pride but also upset their natural frugality. In their frustration, they openly voiced criticism of the electronics company which –in their view– had deliberately designed the cleaner in such a way that it was impossible to repair. In their critique of the in-built obsolescence, they came close to the more ideologically inspired motivation of younger repairers which we indicated above.

Fortunately, most companies are sensitive to the argument of durability (if only for the sake of a positive brand name), hence reparability. The 'reparability index' introduced in France (Bradley & Persson, 2022: 1) stimulates companies to 'design for disassembly': a strategy for 'improving product reparability in which the need to disassemble products for repair [...] and recycling is already considered in the product design phase' (Moalem and Mosgaard, 2021: 3). If in the past the repair of broken objects meant a postponed sale of a new item –hence a loss to the company– nowadays in order to gain competitive advantage companies are more cooperative. Therefore, there is more collaboration between the repair café and companies responding to the requests for repair manuals to equip repairers with the know-how to undertake the restoration. Furthermore, the annual monitor of the repair café reports the ten most often repaired brands (Sony, Siemens, Black & Decker, Bosch, Miele, HP, Samsung, Tefal, Nespresso and Philips)<sup>9</sup> and, in the context of the repair cafés, such listing is a compliment. On the other hand, by making repairs challenging, companies run the risk of being delisted, which could influence their reputations, consumer loyalty and choice in purchasing a particular product.

The economic logic of capitalism stimulates people to discard broken objects rather than invest time or money in their repair. However, as we have argued throughout this article, a strictly economic logic cannot be applied to the process of repairing the broken objects. Product attachment is a major incentive to have broken objects repaired, and as Van der Velden (2021: 8) observes: *'Knowing the age of an object enable the repairers to relate to the emotional value of these objects'*. Two broken record players serve as an example here. Mr Stein (an alias for one of the participants in the Tilburg repair café), who is now in his fifties, purchased his record player twenty years ago. He compared the purchase price of his player to the cost in the current market. The record player is priceless, he explains. It holds a historical value of all the favourite records he has listened to, from records in his collection dating from the 1970s and 1980s. The record player is the material manifestation of his youth.

Similarly, a younger participant Nora, (also an alias) in her mid-thirties, narrated her experience of using a vintage record player. *'[My whole life] I have been a fan of the record player; my dad has one. I watched him play it and I see myself using it. I received mine as a gift three years ago. It was a gift from my brother. I like old, vintage things;*

9 [https://repaircafé.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/05/RepairMonitor\\_analysis\\_2019\\_05052020\\_ENGLISH.pdf](https://repaircafé.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/05/RepairMonitor_analysis_2019_05052020_ENGLISH.pdf)

*it is simple to use. I love the process, taking my time to get the record out of the sleeve, placing it on the player. Every time I listen to the sound the player produces, it is different because of the little scratches emerging in the background. It gives a certain feeling that is entirely different to just playing from Spotify. I also like the process of putting the needle on the record with a flourish and it plays. Listening to some of my records on the device makes me happy and I also cherish it as a gift from my brother.'*

The tales of both Mr Stein and Nora highlight their experience using a device like the record player. Although they were born in different eras, they had a shared sense that the record player singled out a similarity which resonated with their individual identity to the object. The exchange with Nora's brother describes another aspect of value, namely the emotional value of a reciprocal relationship. Gifts strengthen ties and symbolic meanings of mutual exchange—sharing, kindness, love, among other emotional rationales. The exchange process is a general form of reciprocity in which no exact equivalent in terms of economic value is expected. This context of the use value of objects with strong emotional, symbolic attachments makes understandable why both Mr Stein and Nora endeavour to keep and rescue their valued items from becoming obsolescent.

Whereas in the case of the two record players, the emotional value was not based on their economic worth, in other cases the exchange value of an object does have an impact on its emotional value and hence the desire to have the object repaired when it breaks down. Another of our interlocutors made this point when he talked about the changing costs of consumer items. He said that nowadays the norm is purchasing a big-size smart television for 500 euros and then feeling like changing it within a few months. *'When I was younger'*, he recounted, *'having a Philips match-line Television had as much value as being rich. In those days it cost about 2,000 guilders, which approximates two to three-months' salary back then. Now, 500 euros is like a quarter of your monthly salary, earned in a week'*.

While the factor of pricing might be conceived as an aspect of the value exchange in object consumption, at the repair café Mr Stein narrated how disappointed he felt when the record player he had used for over twenty years was damaged. *'It broke down suddenly'*, he said. Even when the player showed no sign of functioning anymore, he left it unused in his home, arguably because it added an aesthetic value. Even though he did toy with the idea of throwing the player away, he hesitated to part it. His reluctance to throw the item away was unrelated to its monetary value as it was a long time since he had bought it, but the trouble of searching for something similar to match the record player's quality was an investment in time he could not afford. Moreover, it had been *this* record player on which he had played his records. In other words, his experience of such a unique product met his criterion of quality in use. He later heard about the possibility of repair at the café and when Mr Stein reflected on his experience at the repair café, we could see expressions of excitement about the restoration of the player light up his face. We could sense that the repair of the device meant more to Mr Stein than just the object's physical transformation. Playing his seventies and eighties records, the record player reminded him of past and current events in his daily life. These interactions constitute the social transformation of items from 'waste' to new use value in the 'biography' (Kopytoff, 1986) of things through repair.

## **Ideological motivation of the repair practice**

We would like to end with a reflection on the motives prompting both the repairers and the owners of broken objects to go to repair cafés. In the preceding sections, we have discussed the emotional value of objects, a sense of belonging to a convivial gathering and a particular habitus as reasons to bring broken objects to repair cafés or to act as a volunteer at one. In a broader context, the repair café gives the participants a satisfied feeling arising from contributing to the underlying goal of a circular economy (see also Moalem & Mosgaard, 2021: 11; Van der Velden, 2021: 6). The ideological aspect and the various forms of convenience are inseparable.

Therefore, ignoring such benefits and incentives received from the practice might negate the significance of environmental activism.

The debate about what motivates individuals to participate in ensuring human well-being and environmental development extends to the concept of pro-social/pro-environmental behaviour. For instance, the volunteer repairers say they find pride in providing such services even in the absence of monetary reward, asserting it is a hobby and they enjoy doing it as recreation. Even more pertinently, they receive the emotional gratification of seeing the smile on customers' faces when their items are restored.

Hartmann et al. (2017) elaborate on the motive of pro-social/pro-environmental behaviour from two perspectives. They refer to 'altruism' as a benevolent or charitable act of goodwill towards the well-being of humanity and the environment. The motive behind such a performative action reveals a one-way exchange system: no reward expectations. However, the warm-glow effect presents another motive for individuals to carry out pro-social/pro-environmental acts. In this case, the emotional feeling generated as pleasure, ego, pride and recognition can reward such deeds. The warm-glow concept suggests that individuals are more likely to act for the greater good of society and environment, to win the praise of a community. The warm-glow effect was also mentioned by Maja van der Velden (2021: 6), who reports that: 'The best experience was the one of fulfilment'.

Pro-social behaviour has become part of the culture of the repair café. The deliberate denial of a monetary reward in exchange for labour defines a rare sense of valuable service rendered. This situation is clearly unlike that in regular shops, in which payment for repair assistance is obligatory (unless still under warranty). The denial of a monetary valuation of services and the free sharing of resources at the repair café creates a sense of belonging to a unique community.

Steven Jackson has pointed out the strong moral element in repair. He considers repair a manifestation of 'care', which involves care ethics: 'foregrounding maintenance and repair as an aspect of technological work invites not only new functional but also *moral* relations to the world of technology' (Jackson, 2014: 231; see also Bohlin, 2019: 7; Bradley & Persson 2022: 4; and Carrier, 2018). The volunteers working as repairers at the repair cafés see their work in such moral terms but, in these small acts, the repairers could rightfully claim special knowledge 'by virtue of their positioning vis-à-vis the worlds of technology' with which they engage (Jackson, 2014: 229).

These repair café community activities resist the capitalist mode of operation in terms of the value of products. Firstly, the fundamental ideology pitches the retardation of accelerated consumption by extending the life-cycle of an object. Secondly, the idealism of the repair café community which communicates the collective ownership of resources conflicts with the capitalist system which is founded on the private ownership of resources and profit-oriented benefits (Araujo, 2017). The sharing of resources, time, expertise and tools fits the term 'commons' as referred to by Helfrich et al. (2010) and, thinking in terms of commons, also goes against the logic of individualism dominant in capitalism (which, *inter alia*, makes it so difficult to protect commons like clean water, fresh air and biodiverse forests in our time). Protecting commons is a practice which contests the hegemonic consumption morality of a capitalist system. Opting for repair is a form of moral or ethical consumption through 'voluntary simplicity'; it is in a way a 'consumer boycott' (Caruana, 2007: 208).

The approach adopted by the repair café community shows the need for collective responsibility, with various stakeholders transitioning into a pragmatic design solution which focuses not only on the creativity of producers but also on the interpretation of a product's value from the perspective of the users interacting with objects in their daily life experience. Such an argument points to the extended use of items and the concomitant reduction in raw materials, which offers the opportunity to head towards the transformation from a linear to a circular economy, countering the logic of linear capitalist consumption. Taking their place alongside state regulatory structures put in place to control excessive consumption or wasteful production,



the repair café practice can be interpreted as a bottom-up initiative in which renewed sensitivity to use-value of products, as opposed to the exchange value of products in capitalism, spreads among the people.

## Conclusion

The repair cafés we have studied in the Netherlands are a form of community repair, in which the product life of broken objects is extended. The convivial atmosphere, the demand for repair of –often emotionally valuable– objects of the clients, and the desire to use their skills on the side of the volunteers-repairers are major factors contributing to their success.

‘Repair is radical’ a volunteer at a repair café said to Barbara Arisi (2020: 79), but truth be told, the repair cafés do not constitute a radical critique of a capitalist mode of production. Neither volunteer-repairers nor customers are anti-capitalism and they treasure material objects. It is better to see repair cafés as a form of ‘abstinence capitalism’, a mild form of critique in which people in a pragmatic fashion desist from a capitalist economy: repairers take their time; both repairers and customers give up on a 24/7 availability; not much effort goes into marketing and certainly not into social media; the financial compensation for the service rendered takes the form of a voluntary gift; old objects with a biography have more value than the newest mass-produced consumer items.

Repair is only in theory a powerful challenge to capitalism. Paul Sweezy argued in the 1940s that the wasteful behaviour of throwing away objects is essential to get rid of the surplus production inherent in the expansion of capitalism, especially in the final stages of capitalism when there are no more new markets left to conquer (Colombijn & Rial, 2016: 23). If repair makes planned obsolescence obsolete, the expansion of a capitalist production could grind to a halt. As it is in reality however, although there is a clear demand for the services of repair cafés, their material impact on attaining a circular economy must be deemed negligible, because of the small scale of the repairs compared to the total production of new objects.

The educational impact, however, is probably bigger, because repairers become very aware of the planned or functional obsolescence of the products. The repairers share their anger about the manufacturers’ strategies with the customers during the informal talks taking place during the repairs. Both repairers and customers, who on the whole do not seem to have an activist attitude, are becoming critical of the linear production process and their enlightenment may spread to others who are willing to act against producers. The two different roles for repair discerned by Johan Niskanen and Duncan McLaren (2023: 4), the sustaining-nostalgic role, and the transformative, future-oriented role, are in practice very close to each other.

A major finding of our research is that repair cafés appeal especially to an older generation. This finding goes against the popular belief that youth is more concerned about a sustainable future and more radical in their criticism and activism than older people. The older generation’s attitude to mend broken objects likely stems foremost from an upbringing in which frugality had been an important value, and less from a modern sustainability concern. The generational effect is reinforced by the social function of the repair cafés, which give purpose to both the repairers and the customers, many of whom are already retired or close to retirement. The relatively limited social media skills of this older generation is an obstacle in reaching a younger generation. If the coordinators of the repair cafés were more active on social media, an intergenerational transfer of anger about companies’ functional obsolescence hindering the attainment of a circular economy would become possible and a strong alliance against non-sustainable capitalist practices could be forged.

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# Anthropology of waste: a research agenda for the study of cities in the era of climate change

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## **Abstract**

The article theorizes the anthropology of waste as a field of knowledge appropriate for thinking and acting in the contemporary world marked by climate change. Responding to the Anthropocene and the subversion of ‘modern’ boundaries, waste is taken here as a privileged analytic framework for understanding how cities have become reconfigured as ‘Anthropocenic urban landscapes.’ By defining the anthropology of waste as an ‘epistemology of the Anthropocene,’ the text provides a conceptual panorama of the contemporary debate from which a set of theoretical, methodological and political questions emerges. The concept of ‘residual infrastructures’ is explored through two ethnographic cases based in Rio de Janeiro, demonstrating the potential of waste to renew the anthropology of cities by articulating the growing fields of waste and infrastructure studies. In the article’s conclusion, the politics of waste, which emerges from residual infrastructures, is also conceived as a politics of knowledge, outlining a research agenda for this expanding field of studies and indicating possible ways forward in an uncertain future.

**Keywords:** Residues; Plastics; Anthropocene; Urban infrastructures; Cities.

# Antropologia dos resíduos: uma agenda de pesquisa para o estudo das cidades na era das mudanças climáticas

## Resumo

O artigo teoriza a antropologia dos resíduos como campo de conhecimento apropriado para pensar e agir no mundo contemporâneo caracterizado pelas mudanças climáticas. Diante do Antropoceno e da subversão das fronteiras “modernas”, propõe os resíduos como chave de análise privilegiada para compreender como as cidades se reconfiguram enquanto “paisagens urbanas Antropocênicas”. Ao definir a antropologia dos resíduos como “epistemologias do Antropoceno”, o texto traça um panorama conceitual da discussão que fornece um conjunto de questões teóricas, metodológicas e políticas. O conceito de “infraestruturas residuais” é discutido a partir de dois casos etnográficos no Rio de Janeiro para demonstrar o potencial dos resíduos de renovar a antropologia das cidades, articulando os crescentes campos dos estudos dos resíduos e os estudos de infraestruturas. Na conclusão, a política dos resíduos, que emerge das infraestruturas residuais, também é concebida como uma política do conhecimento, delineando uma agenda de pesquisa para esse campo de estudos em expansão indicando caminhos possíveis para a ação em vista de um futuro incerto.

**Palavras-chave:** Resíduos; Plásticos; Antropoceno; Infraestruturas urbanas; Cidades.

# Anthropology of waste: a research agenda for the study of cities in the era of climate change

*Maria Raquel Passos Lima*

## **What are the limits of the residual city?**

### **Approaching “Anthropocenic urban landscapes” ethnographically**

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century at least, the Anthropocene has been defined by specialists as a new geological age marked by the reconfiguration of the planet’s biogeophysical processes and composition due to the impacts of human activity, including its role in climate change. This debate has acquired ever more space in scientific discussions and the public sphere, becoming the subject of disputes and diverse epistemological developments.

In the humanities, anthropology especially, the Anthropocene has kindled a range of distinct approaches, conceptual formulations and critical debates (Todd 2015; Tsing 2019; Haraway 2015; Chua & Fair 2019; Chakrabarty 2021; Eriksen 2021; Moore 2016; Ferdinand 2022; Spivak 2003; Spiegel 2013; Hecht 2018b; Liboiron 2016). One of the main analytic strengths of the notion is the way it destabilizes entrenched dichotomies “between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ and ‘human’ and ‘non-human,’ as well as the academic disciplines built around them” (Chua & Fair 2019: 2; Chakrabarty 2021). The Anthropocene proves capable of questioning and reconfiguring conceptual, material, epistemological and ontological boundaries.

One feature of this field is to demand and provide connections between distinct areas of knowledge (Eriksen 2021), a shared ‘critical zone’ and a ‘common ground’ (Latour 2020: 21) between the natural sciences and humanities. Another emergent potentiality is the trend for an “imbrication of the analytical with the political and the ethical” (Chua & Fair 2019: 2), oriented towards urgent action in the present.

While the planetary scale foregrounded by the Anthropocene is revealed as a conceptual and political force, this same aspect is also a weak point. The notion has been subject to numerous critiques that emphasize its homogenizing effect. These critiques highlight, above all, the way in which it conceals the disparities in the distribution of the risks and harm and the inequities and injustices that permeate the forms in which populations are exposed to and suffer from the effects of the Anthropocene across different parts of the planet.

These critiques tend to emphasize the Eurocentric matrix of the dominant narrative of the Anthropocene (Todd 2015, quoted in Chua & Fair 2019), as well as the “historical contingency, political contestation, and socio-economic inequality” involved in its constitution (Chua & Fair 2019: 10). Simultaneously, alternative definitions like the Capitalocene (Moore 2016), Negrocene and Plantationocene (Ferdinand 2022), or ‘planetary’ (Spivak 2003; Spiegel 2013), have been advanced that stress the imperative for reparation and accountability, recognizing the specifically anthropogenic character of climate changes and its colonialist, slave-owning and patriarchal origins – arguments located at the core of the idea of ‘environmental racism.’

Climate change – materialized in phenomena like the rise in sea levels, the extinction of biodiversity, plastic and toxic contamination of aerial, marine and terrestrial ecosystems, global temperature rises and disasters like flooding, landslides and erosion – is manifested as a consequence. The mass production of waste and its contaminative effects comprise one of the central elements of this process, leading some authors to define a *wasteocene* (Armiero 2021).



By acknowledging human beings as ‘geological agents’ (Chakrabarty 2021) responsible for climate change, these critical considerations call attention to inequality, diversity and the importance of considering the multiscale and local contexts involved in the knowledge produced on such complex phenomena (Eriksen 2021). Here I set out to explore the advantages of the anthropological perspective “from below and within” (ibid) in order to think about waste as a critical analytic concept to comprehend the Anthropocene and climate changes. My hypothesis is that through waste we can methodologically operationalize the Anthropocene, descending from the planetary scale to the urban. In this proposal, ‘planetary’ and ‘urban’ are not opposed but contiguous. Moreover, it is this interscalar dynamic that allows the adoption of an ethnographic starting point, anchoring our perspective in a local and specific ‘terrain’ to then trace and comprehend the relations between the multiple dimensions and scales involved without homogenizing or rendering invisible the power relations that compose them.

Waste, like the countless phenomena that constitute climate change, is not limited to pre-established dualities, conventions and boundaries: it is a transgressive object. Hence Moore’s suggestion in her study in the Bahamas (2015: 7) for us to think of an ‘Anthropocene space’ to be explored – rather than taken as a given – serves here as a methodological proposal to reflect, via waste and the residual, on the city as an Anthropocenic landscape.

This analytic movement allows us to question the habitual forms of thinking about urban boundaries, while simultaneously transforming the boundaries of cities themselves, their dynamics and their limits, into an object of analysis allowing us to observe how waste reconfigures them. At the same time, it also interrogates and ethnographically qualifies the concept of the ‘Anthropocene’ along with the concept of the ‘city’ itself.

This article thus explores waste as an emergent object of study, capable of renewing the anthropological perspective on cities and the analysis of urban studies more widely. Waste has the potential to operate as a valuable gateway for reflection since it exposes issues now unavoidable in the life of cities in a present marked by environmental crises and climate changes. As an object of study, they provide analytic access and allow us to touch on key points that challenge contemporary social theory, leading to deep reformulations of the latter and expanding its scope.

An anthropology of waste thus proves a fruitful avenue of research in at least two senses, both connected to the centrality of the ethnographic approach. First, it enables an expansion and reconfiguration of the scientific field in which waste was traditionally conceived and interpreted as objects of study. In the Brazilian intellectual context, converging with a more general tendency, wastes were historically conceived in a strictly ‘technical’ form, appropriated by areas of the ‘hard’ sciences like social medicine and engineering (Reno 2015; Miziara 2001.<sup>1</sup> Over the last 15 years, though, the topic of waste has shifted from the margins to the centre of debates, forging a new field of studies in the humanities, the social studies of waste, also known as waste studies or discard studies.

The humanities and anthropology in particular have a substantial contribution to make in this debate due to their capacity to promote a critical gaze that denaturalizes the belief in the neutrality of technique and the possibility of technical control of the world, an idea central to modern and modernist conceptions (Brouwer et al. 2010; Latour 2005). Waste management techniques thus reveal dimensions that “are and always were as moral and political as they are mechanical and mathematical” (Reno 2015: 566). Anthropology enables us to incorporate cultural perspectives into the reflection on waste that dialogue with questions of power, class, gender, race, identities and territorialities at the core of contemporary society.

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<sup>1</sup> With significant social implications insofar as these specialists founded ways of thinking about the city and urban policies (Chalhoub 1996; Machado et al. 1978; Valladares 2005).

Second, waste as an object of study also enables a renewal of perspectives and ways of thinking about urban contexts within the diverse traditions of urban anthropology itself, stretching and reshaping the limits of what historically and conventionally has been conceived as ‘urban.’ Waste problematizes the dualisms of nature/culture and society/environment, promoting a conception in which ‘nature,’ its elements, fluxes, dynamics and effects, is considered – on the contrary – to be co-constitutive of cities.

The insight that land, water, hills, air, human and non-human bodies, their fluids and excrements, are agents intrinsic to the production of the urban changes the way we think about urbanization processes themselves, expanding the anthropology of cities to include the anthropological analysis of urbanism and urbanization. This adds a strong historical and processual dimension to analysis of the urban. In this way, we can also think of cities as the residues of complex long-term processes marked by sets of sociotechnical interventions that become juxtaposed and superimposed over time. The results are always provisional since their elements, effects and relations extend into the present with unpredictable – or at least not entirely controllable – effects.

These processes are also marked by violent interventions guided by colonial (geo)political dynamics and projects of modernity, which prompt us to imagine cities as the ruins of imperial formations (Stoler 2013). However, waste, putridity and rubbish should not be conceived as simply a metaphor of the colonial legacy, but as a permanent everyday material and practical formation that constitutes biopolitics and actualizes colonial power structures on a global scale (Reno 2015; Liboiron et al. 2018, 2021; Lima 2023).

The idea I wish to stress here is the productivity of waste in the construction of ‘worlds’ (Latour 2020; Haraway 2016) in epistemological, ontological and political terms. This potential is due largely to the heterogeneity of this ‘*sui generis* object,’ which presents both possibilities and challenges for anthropological analysis. Reflecting this characteristic, the text contains a conceptual discussion of waste based on the qualities that define its materiality and its mode of existence in the world. This also concerns the possibilities of producing knowledge about waste and the ways of studying it and acting on the basis of this knowledge. As well as an object of study, waste is conceived as an object of action that engenders specific ontologies/worlds and forms of doing politics.

I present a panorama of the discussion on waste in anthropology, centring on three main theoretical approaches, which open up a series of analytic, ethnographic and political questions. This presentation of the topic does not aim to review the bibliography pertaining to social studies of waste – an interdisciplinary field that, although recent, has been expanding rapidly over the last decade with an increasingly diverse international literature. Instead I seek to demonstrate the fertility of this field of studies for anthropology by highlighting a set of problems that delineate a conceptual panorama, providing theoretical prisms, epistemological entry points and methodological possibilities for research.

Setting out from the concept of residual infrastructures, I discuss the potential of waste for the anthropology of cities and urban studies to articulate two internationally emergent fields of research: waste studies and infrastructure studies. To this end, I present two cases of residual infrastructures that draw from the ethnographic research developed by myself over the last decade and demonstrate how waste makes the city and makes politics. Finally, the politics of waste, which emerges from residual infrastructures, is conceived as a politics of knowledge. Thus I seek to delineate a research agenda as a strategy for identifying possible alternative paths for this expanding field of studies in a global scenario marked by climate change where, faced with an uncertain future, knowledge must be combined with action.

## Epistemologies and ontologies of waste: from modernity to the Anthropocene

The history of waste is profoundly marked by the emergence of the urban-industrial era in a double sense, material and epistemological. Waste possesses an intrinsic relationship to human forms of inhabiting the world and the transformations in ways of life associated with these modes of dwelling. The dynamics of this process articulate the forms of classifying residues, their physical-chemical composition, with the practices associated with their management, which include techniques, lay and specialist knowledge, legal regulations, institutional and administrative apparatuses, commercial networks, and the configurations of urban landscapes and their infrastructures.

Although no human activity is unaccompanied by the generation of waste, for a long period its presence among people and amid human activities occurred in close and unproblematic form (Miziara 2001) to the extent that agrarian societies successfully avoided pollution by solid waste. Waste, its production and the ways of dealing with its presence, is a phenomenon constitutive of cities and urban modes of life, which progressively intensified with industrial development and mass production (Melosi 1981).

From the urban-industrial modern era, the growing production and consumption of commodities made the scale and size of the problem of waste much greater than those faced by previous societies. City dwellers were forced to confront mass pollution in many different forms. In this context, waste emerges “as a major blight” (Melosi 1981: 6). This is when waste also began to be inscribed in regimes of invisibility, entering modern technologies for its disposal and elimination. An apparently paradoxical combination surfaces at this moment: just when waste is being more produced than ever, it is also more systematically made invisible.

The set of practices and techniques composing waste management systems constitute what I have called ‘technologies of concealment’ (Lima 2021a) in that they do not provide an effective solution to the problem but merely remove discarded material to landfills on urban outskirts (Melosi 1981; Reno 2008; Gabard 2011; Lima 2021a; Mauch 2016). The result is their elimination from the field of vision with the removal of discarded materials from the range of the senses, like sight and smell, but also their elimination from the field of reflection and action. As Carenzo (2011: 21) emphasized, the quotidian connection established with *lixo* (waste or garbage) acquires a markedly functional and instrumental meaning, namely that of ridding ourselves of it, saving us from having to reflect even minimally on what happens in terms of its management, treatment and disposal.

The popularity of this ‘model of invisibility,’ the basis on which the production and disposal of waste in the United States, Brazil and many other countries of the Global South are organized, can be credited to the “importance of keeping waste hidden from view” (Reno 2008: 8). In material and cognitive terms, the kinds of management and concealment that this model imposes on waste connects to modern epistemology, marked by the idea of ‘purification’ (Latour 2005). This epistemology is bound to the possibility of dominating the disorder of the natural world through technical-scientific control. The belief system of the world order of twentieth-century modernism “was informed by the vision of technology as a tool of reduction, which could purify nature from a state of randomness into one of cleanliness, controllability and perfection” (Brouwer et al. 2010: 9).

For a long time, waste figured in economic analyses as ‘externalities,’ the unplanned by-products of industrial processes, “entities that escape the cost and profit calculations of business accounting” (Liboiron et al 2018: 334). Hence, waste remained non-apprehensible in cognitive terms, operating its effects in the world protected by the absence of reflexivity on the part of the diverse actors interacting with it.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The rupture of this process of concealment occurred with the discovery of the toxic exposure suffered by peripheral working class and racialized communities, affected by pollution or by living in contaminated localities such as former landfills. This gave rise to the movement campaigning against environmental racism and injustice (Lerner 2010 Bullard & Johnson 2009; Cole & Foster 2001).

Invisibility was constituted as a device of liberal governance where the more the operation and flows of waste management remained invisible, the better (Reno 2015: 561). As a result, waste, pollution and toxicity should not be understood as unintentional by-products of these systems but as a constitutive dimension of industrial capitalism and the corporate organization into global production and destruction networks (Dicken 2011; McGrath-Champ et al. 2015; Herod et al. 2014).

However, the progressive development of this process, with a monumental volume and quantity of diverse kinds of waste accumulating continuously in the world, led to a rescaling in which waste moved from invisibility to ubiquity. The inscription of waste in modern technical flows and regimes of invisibility ceased to conceal them effectively and the twenty-first century marked a turning point in which it became characterized by its mass presence across the planet (Liboiron et al. 2018).

The inevitable exposure to the massive and growing quantity of waste generated by human activity, including carbon molecules, toxic chemical substances, plastics and so on, configured a new era of toxicity defined by scientists as the Anthropocene (Haraway 2015, Hecht 2018b; Liboiron 2016). The existence of waste, relegated to invisibility under the epistemologies of modernism (Latour 2005), acquires centrality in the Anthropocenic perspective. It becomes central not just as a symbol (Eitel 2021) but also as a methodological and epistemological possibility: “in important ways, tracking (toxic) wastes is how we know the Anthropocene” (Hecht 2018a). If the Anthropocene is the “apotheosis of waste,” monitoring the discarded and the dumped is a “key technique of Anthropocene epistemology” (Hecht 2018b: 111).

The fact that waste and traces of human activity have become visible in the depths of the planet’s crust was the initial motive for classifying our present era as the Anthropocene (O’Hare 2019). This categorization is related not just to the quantity and extent of waste now in existence but also to the quality and composition of what is ‘thrown out’ in contemporary societies, marked by mass consumption linked to a logic of disposability (Cooper 2010; Strasser 1999). If there is not just one single epistemology of waste (Alexander & O’Hare 2020), this is because there likewise exist multiple ontologies of waste (Eitel 2021).

The anthropology of waste thus needs to focus its ethnographic gaze on the concrete dimension of waste and its modes of existence in the world. By following waste in all its material heterogeneity – excrements, toxicities, plasticities, metals, radionuclides and so on, as well as its agencing (Cochoy 2014: 117)<sup>3</sup> and the multiple relations and networks it produces, we can discover its ‘productivity’ and the forms in which they co-participate in the making of the world in which we live. This is also a secure methodological path to escape the limiting prism of the modern epistemologies of purity. In these, the material dimension of ‘garbage’ is made invisible by ‘technologies of concealment’ that seek to eliminate it, while, as a category, it is invariably inscribed in a negative semantic field, associated with dirt, contamination and worthlessness.

This ethnographic investment in waste is essential to overcome the ‘technologies of (un)knowing’ (Alexander & O’Hare 2020) that permeate the modes of comprehending what is discarded and rejected. These technologies work to silence alternative forms of knowing these things and objects, concealing the political dimension of situations in which waste matters (Eitel 2021). After all, the production of ignorance, as an absence of knowledge, can also be strategic (Hecht 2018b).

For this reason, amid all their diversity, studies in the field of the anthropology of waste converge towards abandoning the prism of abjection, concentrating instead on the form in which waste and its management can produce new social relations, cultural forms and political demands (Hecht 2018b; Hawkins & Muecke

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3 The French concept of “agencement” and the equivalent Portuguese term “agenciamento” have been translated in this article as “agencing”, following Franck Cochoy’s (2014) discussion of the concept. Here it means both arranging the world (agencing as producing specific agencements, i.e. arrangements/assemblages/networks) and putting these in motion (agencing as ‘giving agency’, i.e. converting some people, non-human entities, or ‘hybrid collectifs’ [Callon & Law, 1995] into agents, or rather actors).

2003, Hawkins 2010; Gille 2010; Reno 2015; Liboiron 2016, 2021; Millar 2008, 2018; Lima 2017, 2021a; O'Hare 2022; Carenzo 2020; Perelman 2010; Fredericks 2018).

In the epistemologies of the Anthropocene, waste is a privileged object due to its planetary dimension, reflecting the scalar magnitude it reaches in both spatial and temporal terms. As Hecht (2018b: 112) warns, though, we cannot lose sight of the fact that “*the violence associated with the Anthropocenic apotheosis of waste is not merely planetary – it also has particular, differential manifestations.*” For this reason, the anthropologist proposes to consider an ‘African Anthropocene’ as her starting point for the analysis of these multiple and differential forms of violence.

Mapping the effects of waste, the ways in which it acts differentially in diverse contexts in the Global North or South, in urban peripheries, at the intersections of class, race and gender, among marginalized populations and minority ethnic groups, is fundamental to comprehending waste, pollution and toxicity. This is especially so when it comes to understanding how waste is agencied and distributed unequally in space, operating as an agent that produces difference, inscribed in the world through diverse forms of violence, racism, colonialism and injustice (Liboiron 2021; Jaffe 2016).

At the same time, waste is also given new meanings by marginalized social groups, who, through discarded objects, encounter livelihoods and claim rights, making the material politics of waste operate along collective lines, appropriated as a ‘commons’ (O'Hare 2022; Solíz Torres 2019). In this way, its inherent political condition comes to the fore. As highly mediating and relational, ambivalent and ambiguous objects, they configure “entanglements of labor, power and possibility” (Reno 2015: 558). Through distinct theoretical and ethnographic approaches, the anthropology of waste provides analytic paths to explore and discover these multiple waste worlds (Doherty 2021).

## **Waste in anthropology: three theoretical approaches and their challenges**

This text is based on Patrick O'Hare's (2019) formulation of waste in anthropology in which he proposes a genealogy centred on three main approaches. Here I adopt the author's schema to discuss how each approach raises a series of specific questions, casting a spotlight on key characteristics and aspects of the anthropological reflection on the life of waste, the worlds that it engenders and the challenges it poses to us. It should be noted that these framings in themselves are limited and each seeks to respond to the evident shortcomings of the others, the relationship between them being one of complementary rather than mutual exclusivity. My reading also is not intended to be totalizing, other theoretical angles and readings being possible.

The first approach, symbolic-structuralist, has its origins in Mary Douglas's classic work, *Purity and Danger* (1976). In her analysis of the idea of ritual purity and the relationship between the sacred and the profane through pollution rites, Douglas highlights the systemic, symbolic and relative character of what is considered impure. Her formulation of dirt as ‘matter out of place’ is frequently cited as a source of inspiration that functions as a foundational origin myth in the field of social studies of waste. Douglas's pioneering analysis is important since it underlines the cultural dimensions of the ideas of pollution and dirt, as constituted by their distribution in a classificatory system, both challenging and reaffirming a determined cultural order.

This perspective, which places the emphasis on the cognitive and linguistic dimension by stressing forms of classification, reveals how making something disposable is also the outcome of a classificatory act that produces specific effects. In my own work, resulting from my doctoral research (Lima 2021a), I discuss the use of the category *lixo* (waste/rubbish) and its consequences. I argue against the analytic use of the term due to the fact that it proves to be “an epistemological straitjacket for things by enclosing them in a framework that objectifies them, in negative fashion, and even conceals their physical qualities, preventing their appreciation” (ibid: 37). I demonstrate that this category and its agency pose three main questions for the reflection on waste:

visibility, transitivity and value. I also stress that bringing the residual to the centre of analysis, eschewing the modern epistemology of purification and negation in favour of pursuing alternative forms of knowledge, logic and meanings, is an ambition that can only be realized empirically and ethnographically.

The modern epistemology of waste is also founded on the hygienist paradigm, which obeys a logic guided by notions of cleanliness and purity. Based on this paradigm, the subjects responsible for handling discarded objects are symbolically assimilated with them, becoming stigmatized and seen as a problem that oscillates between dirt and disease. When applied to the people and places related to waste, this conception and imaginary operate as “images of control” (Hill Collins 2019) of specific populations. Transformed into part of the problem, these populations began to suffer the consequences of the hygienist and civilizational framing that advocated their elimination as a health and safety measure for ‘society,’ as conceived from the viewpoint of the dominant classes. Consequently, these subaltern social groups were subject to relocations, evictions, violence and expropriations, becoming the target of invisibilization devices (Lima 2021a; Reno 2008; Fredericks 2014; Sharma 2021; O’Hare 2022).

These prevailing representations and imaginaries concerning waste can assume authoritarian dimensions, composing the bases for infrastructures of domination. This occurs insofar as these representations separate waste from their particular sociocultural context, projecting apparently ‘universal’ properties onto them. Eitel (2021) called this normative understanding of how waste should be perceived – and through which elimination strategies they should be treated – ‘waste fantasies.’ These fantasies are established as the sole relevant interpretation and affect how we perceive our planet, rooted in histories, narratives and imaginaries of the future.

The symbolic dimension, the imaginaries and conceptions surrounding waste, which underpin its forms of classification and the ways of thinking about and treating waste, thus prove central. The understanding of modern epistemology and waste ‘fantasies’ and their effects in terms of the exercise of domination converges with Liboiron’s reading (2019) of Douglas’s formulation of dirt as ‘matter out of place.’ This does not just concern the forms of classifying and ordering the world but is also an analytic trope on power, which entails the elimination of whatever appears to pose a threat to the order of the system that sustains power.

In this context, materiality, space and morality matter since they perform roles in power structures, sometimes sustaining them, other times challenging them. The materialities of waste are what stretch, destabilize and have the capacity to reconfigure our cultural categories and scientific concepts. Through them not only can we construct a more accurate form of knowledge, we can also elaborate action strategies in response to the complex problems they pose. “Material specificity matters for action” (Liboiron 2016: 5) and thus we arrive (once more) at the material politics of waste.

The precursor to the second, economic-materialist, approach is Michael Thompson and his work *Rubbish Theory* (1979), dedicated to understanding the circulation of materials between different regimes of value, focusing on the creation and destruction of value through material flows. To comprehend how objects are subject to radical transformations in value, the author proposes a tripartite schema of types of goods. The third category of his schema, goods that are neither increasing nor decreasing in value but have no value at all, are rubbish.

The field of the social studies of waste developed and extended its scope through the exploration of the question of value. This poses a challenging analytic problem insofar as “there is no material which is intrinsically trash” (Whiteley 2011: 24), although anything can become it. The discussion shifted therefore away from the ‘absence of value,’ which essentialized waste in modern epistemologies of purification, towards what was identified as a significant characteristic of the modes of existence of waste: its indeterminacy.

The ontological indetermination of the dialectic waste/value formed a starting point (Hecht & Gupta 2017). In this problematic, matter may be waste in one context and a commodity, resource or art in another, such that a change in value can occur even when the physical characteristics of the discarded objects remain unaltered. The processes through which ‘trash becomes treasure,’ with waste transforming into a resource, have drawn the attention of anthropologists in a series of ethnographies. These studies have analyzed the world of reprocessing discarded objects in contexts related to the recycling economy, including the work of waste pickers in landfills, dumps, in the streets or in cooperatives (Millar 2008; Reno 2009; Carengo 2011; Lima 2017; O’Hare 2022; Fredericks 2018).

In the “cultural economies of waste” (Hawkins & Muecke 2003), these pickers perform a complex role in the formation of value, whether monetary, symbolic or social. For this reason, they are characterized by processes of indeterminacy, “introduced by the gap or moment where value is yet to be decided” (2003: xii). This indeterminacy makes waste a ‘plastic’ material – in the sense of its opening to and potential for a change in form (Millar 2018) – and also ‘transitive,’ subject to deviations in trajectory and reversals in status that transform its value, always at risk (Lima 2017). As I have argued, “this transitivity appears to be at the centre of the question of waste and allows a positive light to be cast, in terms of displacement, circulation and flow, on what supposedly has no proper place, the ‘out of place’” (Lima 2021a: 168).

Since “[c]hanges in value are never clear, unidirectional, or fixed in time and space” (Hecht & Gupta 2017), the ethnographic focus should be on the materiality of waste and its flows. This enables us to investigate how waste, in all its ontological heterogeneity, follows its own paths in global processes at diverse scales (Alexander & Reno 2012; Knowles 2017). In its trajectories and ‘social lives’ (Appadurai 1986), waste traverses distinct regimes of value, markets and exchange circuits, mediated by management technologies, regulatory devices and political disputes. Its circulation does not merely compose flows, it also simultaneously produces spatialities and relations whose effects are multiple and remain largely unknown.

The physical-chemical composition and material properties of waste are fundamental to determining the types of flow, nature, extent and duration of the networks that engender it and the heterogenic actors that form part of it. As a strategy to draw attention and give analytic centrality to materiality and its productive agency, scholars have theorized waste as ‘vibrant matter’ (Bennet 2010) that possesses ‘liveliness’ (Hird 2012). The use of this kind of metaphor has been criticized as a ‘waste fetishism’ (Gille 2013; Hecht 2018b) by lending it an agreeable and even mystical connotation that can render invisible the brutal dimensions that accompanies its production in many parts of the world.

Thinking about waste anthropologically is not thinking in general but describing specific materialities to show the ways in which these substances and things have agency and how the materials that are constitutive of waste remain active in the world. When we speak of rubbish or waste, there is a tendency for us to interpret them as solid. Reno (2015) warns about the mistake of thinking of solid waste as a metonym for every kind of waste, calling attention to the simultaneous existence of biological, food, hospital, industrial, toxic, electronic and nuclear waste, among others. At their diverse scales ranging from local to global, the flows, regulations, knowledge, management infrastructures and final disposal are not identical but transform with the historical context, forging distinct ‘waste regimes’ (Gille 2010).

The perspective of economic anthropology, focused on the materiality of consumer goods and on their flows through distinct regimes of value, goes beyond the pollution-purity, dirt-cleanliness dualism that constitutes the symbolic-structuralist approach. It highlights problematics that explore the waste-value binary not as opposite poles. Hence, we shift from the idea of one single cultural approach to the multiple practices that constitute the “political economy and government of waste, and how these are impacted by contemporary knowledge about waste and its effects” (O’Hare 2019: 6)

Waste is not something out of place – not least because when we throw something away, this ‘away’ simply does not exist, as Surak (2011) reminds us. Rather waste is a material inseparable from the production of spatial relations at diverse scales. The flows and politics of waste connect people at huge distances and become actively entangled in planetary processes (Reno 2015: 564). Conceptually and materially, these geographies of waste reconfigure the relations between the Global North and South (Millington & Lawhon 2018). At the same time, they also decisively impact the boundary between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ to the extent that human and non-human agents interact from molecular level up and become hybridized in unpredictable ways. In this way, they shape anthropogenic landscapes, marked by the reproduction of inequalities and by the massive presence of contamination, toxicity and climate crises.

The third approach, intersubjective and posthuman, doubles down on the interest in the dynamics and flows of waste and their effects with “a focus on subjectivity and the kinds of relationships and identities that are created through associations with waste” (O’Hare 2019: 7). The posthuman approach expands the analysis of the kinds of relations involved in waste assemblages, decentring humans by considering them “just another animal involved in cross-species interactions” (ibid).

The investigation of the ways in which waste, in its diverse trajectories, produces subjectivities is concentrated more emphatically, though not exclusively, on the domains of postconsumption, legal and illegal flows, the formal and informal management of waste and the various kinds of work that it engenders. After all “[f]or waste to end up somewhere else, regardless of what is done with it, requires labor” (Reno 2015: 561).

The question of work mobilizes a substantial bibliography in the anthropology of waste, focused on multiple aspects of the recycling economy sustained by workers worldwide. This literature is composed of a series of ethnographies that move forward discussions on the practices of waste pickers and other waste professionals in the global context (Medina 2007), especially in the global south (Schamber & Suárez 2007, 2011a, 2011b). These include the various sociocultural, spatial and subjective dimensions of the informality of work in dumps and landfills (Lima 2017; Millar 2018; Knowles 2017; Samson 2015, Perelman 2010; Reno 2008; O’Hare 2022); the forms of citizenship, privatization and (neo)liberal and popular modes of waste management (Sorroche 2017; Carengo & Fernández Álvarez 2011; Samson 2015; Fredericks 2018); cooperativism, solidary economies and circular economies (Gutberlet et al 2017; Carengo & Sorroche 2021); the formalization of work and political organization (Lima 2018, Perez 2019); the dialogue between work studies and gender (Gorban 2014; Dias & Ogando 2015); management technologies and the final disposal of waste, which may be supposedly ‘green,’ entailing the invisibilization, displacement and dispossession of the urban poor (Lima 2023; Fredericks 2014); or innovations from below that show the potential of these social groups to propose creative and participative alternatives to the ‘integrated’ management models forged in countries of the Global North through processes of ‘vernacularization’ (Carengo 2020; Carengo & Sorroche 2021).

This set of ethnographies explores diverse relationships and dimensions pertaining to the recycling economy, the worlds of labour and the practices of handling and managing ‘solid’ waste. However, the literature dedicated to the exploration of materialities reveals the limits of these conventional forms of classification and the complexity that pervades the modes of existence of waste more broadly. Plastic is paradigmatic in this sense and through it we can highlight the importance of the complementarity between the theoretical approaches presented above and the ways in which they interconnect, deepening our understanding of how challenging these are in ontological and epistemological terms.



## The unsustainable plasticity of plastics: a material politics of waste in action

The introduction of plastic was an irreversible turning point in the history of the composition of waste, marking the emergence of synthetic materials.<sup>4</sup> Its resistance and flexibility and its capacity to replace other materials afforded a diverse range of uses and ‘facilities’ that transformed the practices of consumption and domestic life, turning plastic into an icon of modern life. Its properties as a raw material and its physical-chemical characteristics proved especially favourable to reproducibility (Fisher 2012). This enabled capitalism to enter the era of the disposable and acquire a new level with the “refuse revolution” (Cooper 2010).

Since their introduction, plastic materials have become embedded in all aspects of everyday life and amass everywhere across the planet’s surface on a daily basis. There currently exist more than 10,000 types of plastic polymers in use (Gabrys et al. 2013). In the first decade of the twentieth century, plastic consumption exceeded 260 million tons per year (Thompson et al. 2009). Faced with this scenario, scholars like Gay Hawkins and others have highlighted the ‘vibrant’ dimension of plastic in contrast to the idea of an inert and always ‘bad’ matter, analyzing its productive agency in political terms. Their research explores the processes and modes through which plastic, as a “complex and heterogenic artifact” (Hawkins 2009: 184), relates to life and shapes it. Whether as water bottles (Hawkins 2009, 2013), plastic bags (2010) or through a potentially infinite variety of other objects, these materials configure subjectivities, including in ethical terms. For these scholars, “the material force of plastics prompts new forms of politics, environmental responsibility and citizenship” (Gabrys et al. 2013: 4). Tracing the entire trajectory of the production of a flip-flop from petroleum extraction to a waste dump, Knowles (2014) proposes reconceptualizing globalization. She shows the fragility and precariousness of the latter through the ‘backroads’ that articulate global and local scales, inserting people’s lives in their everyday textures into her analytic framework.

Ethnographies of the recycling economy in Rio de Janeiro, which discuss the centrality of plastic and explore the heterogeneity and diversity of plastic materials in the conformation of the worlds of work of recyclable waste pickers known as *catadores*, argue in favour of the idea of ‘plasticities’ (Lima 2017; Millar 2018). I show how the work of waste pickers, historically disqualified, is based on a sensible knowledge of the properties of plasticities, which derives from a sensitive knowledge developed through the everyday intimate relationship with these materialities (Lima 2017). In this way, I underline the productive dimension of the work of waste pickers, showing how they recreate the value of these materialities and generate new forms of doing politics. The material politics of the pickers is founded on a “capillary, qualitative and artisanal management of waste and on a popular model of recycling” (Lima 2021a: 373), which opposes modern corporate and income-concentrating waste treatment technologies.

In her ethnography, Millar (2018) considers the activity of waste pickers ‘forms of life.’ Analyzing the plastic economy of this work environment, she explores plasticity as a theoretical instrument capable of forging a conceptual language that can account for this world in positive terms, moving beyond the formal/informal duality that characterizes how economic universes are conventionally conceived. Understanding plasticity as the quality of changing form, anthropology reveals the relationality of economic life and the ways in which diverse materials, relations and practices ‘take shape’ within it. Hence, based on histories of plasticities, it foregrounds the creative dimension of the work of waste pickers, offering a critique of any supposed lack of form: “the notion that some things in the world, whether matter like garbage or an act like collecting recyclables on a dump – lack order in themselves” (Millar 2018: 15).

However, the life of plastic waste goes far beyond ‘final’ disposal sites like dumps and landfill sites. “The most common way of dealing with waste is to dump it, whether in bodies of water, in streets and alleys, in geological depressions, or on open land” (Reno 2015: 562). Recycling activity in the Global South is constituted

<sup>4</sup> I analyze this history in more detail in Lima (2021a).

as forms of life, means of subsistence and political struggle of peripheral urban populations. Its importance is thus multiplied since, beyond the environmental question, it also engenders more inclusive and fairer development models and city projects. Yet, however active and necessary this activity may be, the amount of plastic existing on the planet far exceeds the capacity for its reprocessing, reuse and recycling. In this scenario, the recycling of plastic “is like a band-aid on gangrene” Max Liboiron declares<sup>5</sup> (which only reinforces the value and indispensability of the work of waste pickers without which the scenario would be even worse).

Liboiron’s research on plastic pollution in the oceans (2016, 2021) provides various innovative scientific, methodological and political perspectives concerning knowledge of the presence of plastic materialities, their forms of interaction and effects on the planet. While we tend to think of marine pollution as plastic bottles floating on the ocean, microplastics constitute 92% of all plastics in the world’s oceans (Liboiron 2016: 1).

To comprehend the phenomenon of plastic pollution in all its complexity, heterogeneity and magnitude, the author deepens and radicalizes the investigation of plastic materiality at cellular level. This is significant insofar as plastic materialities differ among themselves – “the materials fragment, travel, and influence bodies differently” (Liboiron 2016: 5) – and the diverse types of harm also vary in different and unpredictable ways, depending on their interactions and agencings in the world.

Microplastics act distinctly from other plastics, being invisible, dispersed and toxic, although the characterization of toxicity is part of a scientific controversy over whether plasticizers (or monomers), chemical substances that are routinely added to polymers (plastic itself), should be considered as plastic or not (Liboiron 2016). Nonetheless, they cause harm and are known as ‘bad actors’ since they interfere in ‘natural’ systems by altering genetic material, among other effects. Hence, plastics pollute in two forms, physically and chemically, and both frequently occur in conjunction.

All these chemical substances are endocrine disruptors, present in the bodies of living beings (our own bodies and those of other species). Microplastics actualize the ubiquity of waste and its pollutive scale, as well as questioning the boundaries between humans, non-humans and the ‘environment.’ This is because “no body, ecosystem, consumer product, or landscape is likely to be without plastics or their associated monomers for long” (Liboiron 2016: 11). They also rescale our temporal perspective of these phenomena, since, while becoming an imbricated part of bodies and ecosystems, the temporality of their agency can persist and continue to interact for generations and indeed millennia. Liboiron calls for a ‘radical’ action-oriented science whose researchers operate in networks as activists and advocates. In this way, their knowledge can be used to force through legislative changes that target the (industrial) sources producing plastics in order to reduce or ban their accumulation in the oceans (and in the world).<sup>6</sup>

The case of plastics shows how these materialities are challenging, how they problematize theories of pollution and force a redefinition of the ways of knowing and acting in relation to them. It becomes clear how waste, as “signs of life” (Reno 2014), is a key object of study in an era characterized by the impact of human activity in all terrestrial systems. The massive and unprecedented presence of industrial materials across the planet is having unintended effects that threaten life on earth in unpredictable ways. Investigating the life, forms of action and material politics of waste is an indispensable research path in the Anthropocene, which emerges as a socio-material theory of planetary change.

Marked by multiple kinds of flows and by the massive and ever-increasing presence of waste in every corner of the planet, this entire scenario is formed by structural dimensions relating to the development and dissemination of the political economy of capitalism at a global level, along with its crises. This process is

5 Declaration made in the documentary *Guts* (2019), directed by Taylor Hess and Noah Hutton, part of The Atlantic Selects, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgLKoJZodHw>

6 Their own work and the activities of the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR) that they direct are an example of this perspective.

deepening the glaring inequalities between rich and poor across the world, leading to ethnic conflicts and wider disputes on forms of knowledge and (ethical, legitimate, fair and sustainable or not) ways of living, existing and appropriating life on earth, which entail specific dilemmas for life in cities.

### **Waste making the city and politics: residual infrastructures in Rio de Janeiro**

This text conceives the anthropology of waste as a particularly appropriate field of studies for thinking about life in the contemporary world marked by climate crises. Waste as an anthropological field of study ‘forces thought’ (Gabrys et al. 2013: 5) and this analytic perspective provides methodological, epistemological and political instruments for making visible, accessible and comprehensible waste and its worlds in their multiple ontologies. This means eschewing a limited understanding of waste as merely ‘discarded objects’ in favour of a more inclusive comprehension. This considers waste as multiple human and non-human agents, which constitute heterogenic networks of relations in interactions in permanent expansion. These networks of agents and their relations produce unpredictable effects that far surpass the possibility of technical control of the world along the lines that modern epistemologies made believe possible.

The anthropology of waste thus contains the potential to ethnographically revitalize contemporary anthropological theory and social theory. Faced with this panorama, my proposal is to think about the potential of this perspective to reinvigorate the anthropology of cities and urban studies in the humanities more broadly, recognizing the extremely complex scenario characterized by the Anthropocene. I take as inspiration the proposal of Hecht (2018b) to think about waste as “interscalar vehicles for the Anthropocene” to ‘anchor’ the ethnographic perspective in urban contexts at a local scale. The advantage of this perspective is to forge an analytic framework that allows us to avoid “cutting the network” (Strathern 2014) and losing sight of the potential connections with other regional and global scales.

The central argument here is that waste makes cities and also makes politics. This idea gains legibility, conceptual substance and methodological instrumentality through the proposal to articulate social studies of waste, in particular the anthropology of waste, with the field of infrastructure studies. Although relatively recent, this field has expanded notably over the last two decades since at least the publication of Star (1998).

Infrastructure studies, marked by their interdisciplinarity but also by their ethnographic perspective, have provided, through a diversity of approaches, significant contributions towards thinking about the complex dynamics and varied dimensions constituting cities (Larkin 2013; Anand 2017a; Simone 2004; Anand et al. 2018; Von Schnitzler 2016; Graham & McFarlane 2015; Hetherington 2019; Murphy 2013; Venkatesan et al. 2018). The very notion of infrastructure and the theoretical debate on its ‘plasticity’ (Lima 2020) as an object of study reveal convergences with the discussion on waste, making this dialogue highly productive.

Infrastructures, as “things and also the relation between things” (Larkin 2013: 329), are materialities that enable the movement of other materials. Hence, they constitute “the architecture for circulation, literally providing the undergirding of modern societies, and they generate the ambient environment of everyday life” (ibid: 328). Infrastructures are systems that encompass systems; they mediate exchanges at a distance, composing an amalgam of technical, administrative and financial expertises with their political rationalities and material arrangements. These arrangements constitute the basis for the functioning of modern economic and social systems. Infrastructures possess a symbolic, aesthetic and affective dimension, shaping subjectivities, as well as a highly mediating character, placing persons, objects and spaces in dynamic interaction. In this way they also show themselves to be interscalar objects, operating at multiple levels simultaneously.

Originating in science and technology studies, governmentality studies and other areas, infrastructure studies add ethnographic insights into the practical materiality that sustains and configures cities. In this way, they facilitate the exploration of the political dimension unveiled and disputed through its everyday texture

(Venkatesan et al. 2018; Larkin 2013; Von Schnitzler 2016; Pilo & Jaffe 2020). Similarly, in the literature on waste, its political dimension is set in relief (Liboiron et al. 2018; Cirelli & Maccaglia 2021; Millar 2012; Jeffe 2016; Rial & Colombijn 2016). As political matter, waste is permeated, in its most latent dimension, by asymmetric and very often unjust power struggles, which reproduce racialized structures of inequality embedded in urban geographies. These inequalities are inscribed more durably in the continuous processes of city-making through the construction, maintenance and transformation of infrastructures.

More recently, these two fields of studies have been converging through the production of ethnographies situated at the intersection between waste and infrastructures (Harvey 2020; Fredericks 2014, 2018; Doherty 2021; Butt 2020; Chalfin 2016; O'Hare 2022; Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2020). These works highlight a set of aspects showing the centrality of waste management infrastructures for urban life and the ways in which they unequally constitute and modulate the population's rights, access, risks and opportunities in distinct spaces of cities. The epistemological contributions provided by this conjunction reside in the capacity to analytically articulate multiple dimensions, relations, spatialities and temporalities. These show the ways in which waste and its infrastructures constitute urban processes, making politics and the city.

Following on from the above, I situate myself in this debate by presenting the concept of 'residual infrastructures,' elaborated as an analytic outcome of my research on waste, developed in Rio de Janeiro over the last ten years. To discuss the concept and show its analytic yield, I summarize two cases that offer distinct examples. While the first involves solid waste in Jardim Gramacho, a district of Duque de Caxias, a city neighbouring the state capital and forming part of Rio de Janeiro's metropolitan region, the second focuses on toxic waste in Volta Redonda, an industrial city in the southern region of Rio state. Both point to the potential of combining waste studies and infrastructure studies to think about urban universes. They show how waste makes the city in specific ways, while also mobilizing different waste politics for the urban populations affected by them.

Discussing mining production in Johannesburg, Hecht writes that mining "makes mountains, as well as holes" (2018a: 2). To discuss the city, I take as a starting point the idea that waste makes mountains. This leads us directly to a consideration of waste and its agency in the production of the urban landscape, configuring wastelands (Chalfin 2016) and toxic landscapes (Stewart 2017). This process of producing mountains does not take place without the mediation of infrastructures, which sustain cities and our ways of inhabiting them.

Unlike the rock formations generated by natural processes, valorized as the singular relief that composes the urban landscape of Rio de Janeiro, the specificity of waste mountains is that they are produced symbolically, technically and materially as something not to be seen. Hence, the territories that these form in the cities, irrespective of their physical monumentality, are inscribed in regimes of invisibilities that systematically work to conceal them. Despite being 'invisible' and marginalized localities, however, these territories integrate and connect the city, composing infrastructures fundamental to urban life and in practice constitute social universes where peripheral populations make their lives.

These less visible or 'banal' (Anand 2017b) aspects prove central to comprehending the political and environmental dimensions involved in urban processes. This is because infrastructures radically alter landscapes and materially reconstruct the environment, while simultaneously differentiating populations and subjects through subordination, colonization, racialization and diverse forms of violence (Anand 2018: 5). It is through waste, residual infrastructures and their gaps between them, therefore, that inequalities are reproduced, while potentialities and tensions emerge that point to other city projects and alternative futures.

The notion of 'residual infrastructures' (Lima 2023) comprises a conceptual tool for the ethnographic analysis of the production of cities through waste, along with the politics that it engenders, by focusing on the *residual* dimension constitutive of urban infrastructures. Residual here is understood as the non-dominant or non-hegemonic aspects, relations and processes that operate not only in the worlds of waste (or residues)

but also in broader infrastructural processes that make the cities. In this sense, the notion is based on the ‘forced thought’ produced by waste but is not limited to the analysis of waste as a theme or object, being able to contribute at a broader theoretical level to the reflection on other contexts.

By focusing on the residual aspect of infrastructures, the notion can conceptually and ethnographically restore them from their previous invisibility, making palpable and legible the opaque relations otherwise left in the shadows of urban processes and their disputes. Through the concept, what operates in practice from a marginal position can be located at the centre of analysis, thus emphasizing “connection, interdependence and reversibility by addressing relations between supposed margins and centers” (Lima 2023: 2). In this sense, it performs an integrating role, “assuming as part of a single infrastructure broader spaces of the city, intermunicipal regions and other connections that operate in practice” (ibid).

In distinct research projects, I investigated the history of two waste mountains, their politics and the way in which they make the city through the analytic framework of residual infrastructures. In the first case, which comprised my doctoral research and which I have analyzed in more detail in other publications (Lima 2017, 2018, 2021),<sup>7</sup> I examined the waste mountain located in Jardim Gramacho. In this research, my analysis of the infrastructure of waste management is articulated with the recycling industry in Rio de Janeiro’s metropolitan region. This infrastructure was centred on the Jardim Gramacho Metropolitan Landfill (AMJG), planned by the military dictatorship governing the country at the time as a solution for urban cleaning and for waste management throughout the greater metropolitan region in the 1970s.

Despite the initial project, the landfill began to function as a ‘dump’ outside the technical and sanitary regulations existing at the time, generating social, urban planning and environmental problems for the locality. It continued to operate in completely irregular form until 1992, when the site underwent a process of recuperation and began to be run as a controlled landfill. This was prompted by the city’s hosting of the UN Conference on Environment and Development, known as Eco-92 or Rio-92, a landmark event in the emergence of a more wide-ranging environmental debate in Brazil. In 2012, the year when the city would again host the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, known as Rio+20, the waste disposal activities of the Jardim Gramacho landfill would finally be wound up on the eve of the event after 34 years of operation.

In its final year of operation, the landfill was operating 24 hours a day, receiving 9,000 tons per day and the waste mountain at the site had grown to 40 metres in height. During its more than three decades of operation, the landfill activity attracted a substantial population of *catadores* (waste pickers) to the surrounding area, people who work in informally collecting and selling discarded objects at final disposal sites or in the streets. These people are central mediators in the recycling industry in Brazil and throughout the Global South. In 2012, at least 1,600 pickers worked at the locality directly and the recycling economy in Jardim Gramacho, mediated by the artisanal management work of the pickers, maintained global connections (Millar 2012). The international market of the recycling industry with which the waste economy of Jardim Gramacho was integrated presents a capacity to generate 200 billion dollars per year (Millar 2018: 8).

The closure of the Jardim Gramacho landfill was succeeded by the implantation of a biogas plant. Inaugurated in June 2013, the plant’s objective was to sell the methane gas produced by decomposition of the waste matter discarded at the landfill to Petrobras’s Duque de Caxias Refinery (REDUC) and also participate in the international carbon credit market (Lima 2021a). In parallel, as a replacement for the old landfill, a new waste disposal site was created, the Waste Treatment Centre (*Central de Tratamento de Resíduos*: CTR) in the municipality of Seropédica, 70 km from the capital, also based on technological solutions for treating waste as a source of energy generation (Lima 2021a).

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<sup>7</sup> My ethnographic fieldwork was conducted over 14 months between April 2011 and June 2012 and involved accompanying the work of waste pickers in their everyday activities, meetings and assemblies relating to the process of closing the Jardim Gramacho Metropolitan Landfill.

I analyzed the closure of the landfill as an infrastructural event (Carse 2017), which extends in time and articulates past and future temporalities, permitting a mapping of continuities and discontinuities. By focusing on the reconfiguration of waste management engendered by this event, the notion of residual infrastructures allowed these multiple temporalities and spatialities to be incorporated into the analysis, integrating spatially distant enterprises within the same analytic framework (Lima 2023).

Scholars of waste have highlighted processes of waste dump closure in the Global South as examples of enclosures under late capitalism (O'Hare 2022; Sharma 2021), removing informal and poor urban workers from the spaces where they produce their livelihoods and make their lives. Although Waste-to-Energy (WTE) technologies do not eliminate the threat to pollution (Reno 2015: 564), the projects based on such technologies are sold as 'green,' competing for the same fluxes of waste accessed by pickers to recuperate materials (De Bercegol & Gowda 2019; Demaria & Schindler 2016).

Responding to this scenario, the concept of residual infrastructures provided a framework for the multiple scales, dimensions and broader processes that involved the spatial, temporal, technopolitical and symbolic transformation of the Jardim Gramacho landfill in its everyday textures. Through the concept, the specificities of the modes of urbanization of the city of Rio de Janeiro and its historical process of colonization are integrated into the analysis of waste management. The incorporation of long-term processes allows the mapping of "continuities and discontinuities and the degree to which changes actualize forms of reproduction or represent conditions of possibility for effective social and urban transformations" (Lima 2023: 2).

In this way, I sought to focus on the material, racial and bodily dimensions that compose urban infrastructures and the forms in which racism, colonialism and structural inequalities persist in the political dynamics of the present. By defining waste pickers as "people as embodied infrastructure" (Lima 2023), they could be qualified as a constitutive part of the sociotechnical waste systems. The presence of colonialisms in modern waste management systems was thereby set in relief, along with the way in which they (re)produce racialized structures of inequality given the "systematic attempts at exclusion of these people from the system itself, despite the centrality that they have in practice" (2023: 6).

The politics of waste that emerges from the residual infrastructures of Jardim Gramacho is inscribed within an unequal power struggle. In this struggle, waste pickers fight against large corporations associated with WTE technologies and against the packaging industry. The fight of Brazil's organized waste pickers has acquired increasingly global proportions (Gabard 2011) in the pursuit of rights. Their demands include formal participation in the conception and implementation of public policies for waste management and the reverse logistics packaging systems, developing strategies to regulate these infrastructures through legal devices and guarantees.

Brazil and its population have just been through the double trauma of a pandemic associated with the far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro and his project for destroying the moral foundations and constitutional framework sustaining the democratic state in Brazil. In response, the waste pickers have been working hard to oppose WTE technologies through a Brazilian Front Against Incineration<sup>8</sup> and against the Recycle+ Program (Federal Decree 11,044/22) instituted by the former president. This program revoked the previous regulatory framework of the National Policy for Solid Waste, passed in 2010 by the Workers' Party administration, a landmark in the institutional achievement of the waste pickers movement in the country.<sup>9</sup>

Controlled landfills and dumps remain in operation across all regions of Brazil, receiving a total of 29.7 million tons of waste, in inadequate conditions, in 2022 alone.<sup>10</sup> While waste can undergo processes of both

8 See <https://incineradornao.net/#home>

9 See <https://www.mncr.org.br/sobre-o-mncr/notas-e-declaracoes/posicionamento-do-mncr-sobre-o-decreto-federal-11-044-22>

10 This figure corresponds to 39% of total waste collected. Source: *Relatório Temático Catadoras e Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis*. Defensoria Pública da União, 2022.

commoning and enclosing, the spaces of waste dumps may also operate as an “urban commons” (O’Hare 2022). In this sense, the fight of Brazilian pickers for rights and for an active role in waste management converges with the principal that “rubbish belongs to the poor” (ibid). The waste politics of Brazilian pickers takes form in the campaign for a solidary and popular recycling model as an inclusive and sustainable alternative to waste management. In the process, they design development models and city projects oriented towards the construction of socioenvironmentally fairer possible futures.

The second case, an outcome of my postdoctoral research<sup>11</sup> (Lima 2020, 2021b), examines the waste mountain located in Volta Redonda, a city in the southern region of Rio de Janeiro state. The case analyzes the steelworking infrastructure related to the production of the National Steel Company (*Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional*: CSN), created in the 1940s as a central element of the project for development of the national industry. The President Vargas Plant, its main unit, has the name of the president responsible for implementing national developmentalism in the country. This symbolically associated the company with the idea of Brazil’s progress and modernization.

Steel construction gave rise to Volta Redonda, popularly known as ‘City of Steel,’ which grew up around the company and developed as a result of this industrial activity, following the ‘city-company’ model (Piquet 2012). This configuration has implications for the power relations between the steel plant and the city, which are inscribed in urban space through territorial control and in the population through the domination exerted over the workers under its control, influencing even municipal governments (Lima 2012). From its creation to the present, the company passed through significant organizational changes, altering their corporate strategies and business model with a privatization process that amplified its activities to a network of international production.

The company’s activity was always a dominant factor in terms of the contours and possibilities for local development. However, the company’s hegemony was counterbalanced from the 1980s by the strengthening of a workers’ union movement and civil society organizations under the initiative of the Catholic church acting in support of popular causes. By the 2000s, this process had expanded with protests focusing on the impact of layoffs caused by the organizational transformations in the company and the emergence of an environmental movement with the forming of the Southern Environmental Commission (*Comissão Ambiental Sul*).

Dependent on the intense exploitation of natural resources, the activities of the mining and steel industries involve the generation of numerous pollutants (Milanez & Porto 2008). This has profound socioenvironmental consequences involving specific forms of violence and harm deriving from the production of toxic waste (Hecht 2018a; 2018b). One of the main characteristics of these toxic substances is their invisibility, which makes science the indispensable mediation to their identification and analysis, as well as to the transformation of the harmful effects of their existence into a public issue. This mediation is central to legitimizing policies for regulating business activities and public and environmental health, as well as mitigating and providing reparation for affected populations (Goldstein 2017; Liboiron et al. 2018; Boudia et al. 2014).

My analysis from the perspective of infrastructure studies of the contamination of the Volta Grande IV housing complex, located in a low-income district of Volta Redonda, by industrial waste from CSN (Lima 2020), led to my development of the concept of residual infrastructures.<sup>12</sup>

The Volta Grande IV housing complex or condominium is situated in an area used as a deposit for the industrial waste produced by the President Vargas Plant for more than four decades. Today this area is run

11 Fieldwork was conducted over the course of 2017 by accompanying the meetings and public events on the contamination caused by the mountain of toxic waste, as well as qualitative interviews with key actors and the analysis of the press material and documents from the judicial proceedings. This research was financed with a postdoctoral award from the Support Program for Postgraduate Studies and Scientific and Technological Research in Socioeconomic Development through Application Process no. 42/2014 of the Coordination for Higher Education Staff Development (CAPES).

12 Although the concept was only coined in a later work (Lima 2023), I consider that I applied the idea of residual infrastructures *avant la lettre* through what I called ‘steelmaking infrastructure’ (2020).

by the company Harsco Metals, which stores the steelmaking waste and processes it for use in road building and civil construction. Leaks from one of the drainage pools, situated underneath four dwellings, led to the contamination of part of the residential area. As the floor of the houses deteriorated, the residents realized that the situation was abnormal and, fearing the potential risks and harm to their health, began a process of mobilization.

The gigantic 40 metre mountain of steel slag from CSN's activities receives around 80,000 tons of waste per month, totalling five million tons of toxic waste in the locality in 2018 alone (Lima 2020: 108). The volume of this waste is steadily increasing as Harsco's capacity to process and sell the material, around 30,000 tons per month, is lower than the total production. The yard where the company conducts its activities, bordering the housing complex, is also situated next to an environmental conservation unit. This is a permanent and fully-protected area on the Paraíba do Sul River, a source responsible for providing water to 11 million inhabitants in Rio de Janeiro state.

The conceptual framework of residual infrastructures allowed the discussion to centre on the invisible dimension of steelmaking, characterized by the toxicity of its waste. In this way, it enabled a reflection on the life of toxic substances and their agencings, which operate at the opaque pole of the infrastructure visibility regime, as an analytic strategy for ethnographically mapping the latent connections between company and territory, as well as the power relations and political disputes that they engender.

The description of toxic waste and its assemblages in the composition of the steelmaking infrastructure was explored in four scenarios: contamination, science, justice and mobilization of the affected population in the environmental arena. In this context, time emerged as a variable capable of articulating the heterogenic relations and complex dynamics that configure the politics of waste of steelmaking infrastructure. This politics unfolded in an "arena of dispute around security/ risk and potential damage to the local population in terms of environmental health" (Lima 2020: 88).

The temporalities that permeated and constituted the steelmaking infrastructure at its diverse levels were appropriated and mobilized by actors from the investigated universe with differential effects on the corporate strategies and on social contestation. The analysis showed that "the slow temporality of contamination, science, and justice is given agency and appropriated as a resource for the steelworks, constituting its corporate strategy" (Lima 2020: 117). Meanwhile, on the other side, "the dispute processes of contestation and the mobilization strategies of the actors, through waiting, foment the constitution of a politics of resilience" (ibid).

The accumulation of toxicity in Volta Redonda is thus revealed in a double sense: financially for the company, which accumulates profits, while residents from the contaminated area are exposed to more and more harm. The city's population suffers from the accumulation of toxic pollution in the environment, whose agencings include the soil, air, underground water, human bodies and non-human organisms, with diverse and unpredictable effects over time. Insofar as the entire urban space of the city composes the infrastructure for the steelworks, its toxicity materially shapes the territory in unequal forms. This produces not just isolated "zones of sacrifice" (Lerner 2010) but also a "slow infrastructural violence" (Nixon 2013; Truelove & Ruszczyk 2022) that affects bodies, communities and the urban landscape as a whole in diverse ways.

The gradually increasing perception of the effects and risks of toxic pollution has also led to the mobilization of Volta Redonda's civil society in a coalition that has been strengthening and driving the movement of contestations of CSN's activities and its power. This coalition comprises a network with the potential for expansion including the Volta Grande IV residents' commission, the Southern Environmental Commission, NGOs, research institutions like the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (FIOCRUZ) and universities, the Public Prosecutor's Office, alternative media channels for making denunciations like Volta Redonda Abandonada, and social movements. These movements include the Volta Redonda Movement for Ethics in Politics, the Movement of People Affected by Dust from CSN, created in 2018, and environmentalist movements campaigning to protect



Rio state's waters like the Living Bay Movement. The latter has been pursuing networked actions against Law Bill 6475/2022, currently under discussion, which proposes the relaxation of regulations concerning the Middle Paraíba Wildlife Refuge (REVIS MEP), diminishing the band of protected shoreline along the Paraíba do Sul River that currently prevents toxic waste from being deposited. These movements have warned about the threat of the waste mountain collapsing and transforming into "another Mariana and another Brumadinho." This is a reference to the disasters caused by the rupture of two tailings dams in Minas Gerais state,<sup>13</sup> which would have a tragic effect on the 'hydrosocial cycle' (Ballesteros 2019) of the entire region.

The two cases of residual infrastructures in Rio de Janeiro shed light on the multifaceted and multiscale practices and dynamics that make the city. These involve not only regimes of monumentality and the logic of visibility but also the everyday residual dimension, produced in the shadows, in unspectacular form on the margins. The cases thus illustrate how waste and its infrastructures, along with the politics agenced by it, comprise a privileged object of analysis for the reflection on urbanization processes and the production of cities in the context of climate change.

The challenges posed by the ubiquity of waste include the innumerable forms in which toxic chemical substances and discarded objects, like plastic materials, circulate at the tiniest and most complex scales of ecosystems. They produce relations that are inscribed in unpredictable and uncontrollable fashion in spaces, reconfiguring the composition of soils, waterways, groundwater, air and the multitude of human and non-human bodies.

The environmental regulations and technologies developed to eliminate waste, or to remedy contamination from it, continue to operate without any structural alteration in the system. The latter continues to generate uninterrupted monumental quantities of waste in diverse urban environments and, consequently, across the planet.

In the case of Jardim Gramacho, the existence of a population of 1,600 waste pickers working day and night recuperating and collecting waste dumped at the landfill enabled a significant increase in its operational lifetime. But even with this work over the 25 years during which the landfill was functioning, the recycling activity had a limited effect in terms of controlling the growing amount of materials and substances accumulated in the environment. Whether through concealment technologies like landfills or with new technologies that claim to be green like WTE and biogas plants, contamination persists.

The pollution deriving from the accumulation of waste at the Jardim Gramacho Metropolitan Landfill and neighbouring sites, which include the industrial complex of the Duque de Caxias Gas and Chemical Hub, along with the REDUC Oil Refinery and innumerable polymer factories, compromises not only soil quality but also affects the region's water.<sup>14</sup> Guanabara Bay is one of the most scenic areas of Rio de Janeiro, a coastal city shaped by rivers, lagoons and tides along the Atlantic coast.

The hydrographic basin formed by the bay is a vital part of the landscape of the world's twentieth largest metropolitan area, home to 8.4 million inhabitants in 16 cities and towns (Alencar 2021: 31). With a surface area of 377 km, it is estimated that the 143 rivers and streams flowing into the bay discharge around 18,000 litres of untreated sewage into its waters per second, along with waste from the 14,000 factories operating in the region (ibid 53, 64). Whether in the form of slurry, solid waste, chemical substances or microparticles, the discharge of waste has turned Guanabara Bay into the environment with the most microplastic-contaminated surface waters in the world (Olivatto 2017: 124).

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<sup>13</sup> I highlight the work of the Environmental Themes Studies Group (GESTA) coordinated by Andrea Zhouri with the populations affected by the disaster, including a study of the reparation policies.

<sup>14</sup> REDUC, inaugurated in 1961, was a landmark in the region's industrial growth and the installation of other petrochemical industries. By 1975, when FEEMA, the environmental monitoring agency, was created, REDUC was already the largest source of pollution in Guanabara Bay (Coelho 1983, quoted in Sedrez 2004: 241).

In the case of Volta Redonda, the technologies for the management of steelmaking waste and the processing of steel slag for use in civil construction reveal the limitations and indeed the unsustainability of this strategy. The volume of processing remains below the volume of waste generated, which leads to the accumulation of this waste not only on the slag heap but also as particulates in the air, inhaled by the local population, and in the Paraíba do Sul River. This brings the risk of the mountain collapsing due to the silting of the river shore and the growing volume of material deposited at the site, which should be preserved given that it forms part of an environmental protection area.

Setting out from these two waste mountains, which compose distinct residual infrastructures, we are able to think about urbanization processes, industrial configurations and specific development strategies. Furthermore, we can analyze how, through them, urban geographies are fabricated with their own dynamics that challenge the borders established by cities, blurring the limits between urban and supposedly natural landscapes, water and soil.

Contamination and the relations mobilized by waste subvert and recompose the borders where the city conventionally begins and ends as the 'urban' spreads into bodies of water and their flows. In one case, it reaches Guanabara Bay and eventually the Atlantic Ocean; in the other, the Paraíba do Sul River, which flows into the north of Rio state, constituting water infrastructures and their own hydrosocial cycles, which can cover large regions and global connections.<sup>15</sup> It is these connections and borders reconfigured by waste, as well as the scales that they put under tension, that forge what I call 'Anthropocenic urban landscapes,' allowing us to think about the Anthropocene from the urban and its residual infrastructures.

### **The residual as a politics of knowledge: a research agenda for an uncertain future**

This article has presented the epistemological, methodological and political potentialities involved in the constitution of an emergent field of studies in anthropology, the anthropology of waste. I argued that waste, due to its ontological nature, is a particularly appropriate object of study when it comes to theoretically and ethnographically confronting the complexities of the contemporary world, marked by climate change. Its exploration also enables us to respond to the challenges that the multiple water, sanitary, socioenvironmental and urban crises associated with these changes pose to us at diverse scales.

Insofar as it stretches and subverts the boundaries between nature and culture, society and environment, waste critically impacts the foundations of modern epistemologies. As a consequence, waste is capable of renewing the anthropological perspective on cities and urban studies, as well as contemporary anthropological and social theories as a whole.

While waste in the modern urban-industrial era, as a phenomenon constitutive of cities, emerges as a problem solved by its technical and cognitive inscription in regimes of invisibility, in the contemporary world it has passed from invisibility to ubiquity, demanding new forms of comprehending and dealing with it. In this sense, waste becomes a key analytic framework for accessing the Anthropocene, central to the formation of epistemologies adequate to the multiple ontologies and complexities of waste in terms of constructing worlds and their effects from a local scale to the planetary.

The central idea concerning the productivity of waste in the fabrication of worlds aimed to discuss the ways in which waste makes the city and also makes politics. Setting out from two ethnographic cases centred on the history of waste mountains in Rio de Janeiro, I argued in favour of the concept of residual infrastructures as a way to demonstrate the profitability of combining social studies of waste with infrastructure studies. This combination forged a theoretical-methodological strategy for understanding urban processes in a present

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, the doctoral research of Julia Dias Pereira analyzing the erosion of the Paraíba do Sul River floodplain and the infrastructural connections that produce this process, including the construction of a private port linking the region to China.

marked by the Anthropocene. In this sense, waste and its infrastructures, through their reconfiguration of the multiple boundaries composing cities, constitute Anthropocenic urban landscapes.

In Brazil, the anthropology of waste is still an incipient field. Although there exists a set of important works and research groups contributing to the socioenvironmental discussion with ethnographies on large-scale construction projects, conflicts involving industrial activities, the mining industry and its disasters, environmental justice and other topics, these groups do not tend to focus on the debate surrounding waste as an object of study. At the same time, the diverse ethnographies that discuss cooperativism, the solidary economy or the informal work of waste pickers, are scattered without configuring a specific field. The collections organized by Carmen Rial (2016; Colombijn Eckert & Rial 2020) are pioneering initiatives in the development of an anthropology of waste in the country. Likewise, the field of anthropology of infrastructures in Brazil has emerged recently with the publication of the collection edited by Alex Vailati and Anthony D'Andrea (2020) and the dossier organized by Marcella Araújo, Camila Pierobon and Mariana Cavalcanti (2023) with works produced by the Infrastructure Studies Group.<sup>16</sup> The latter connects a network of research on urban studies conducted by research groups based in Rio de Janeiro universities.<sup>17</sup>

By providing a panorama of broader theoretical and methodological questions pertaining to waste as an object of study, this text seeks to help consolidate the anthropology of waste in the Brazilian anthropological setting. At the same time, it extols the potential of this field of studies to renew the reflection on cities and the ways of thinking about urban contexts in the face of the climate crisis. Aiming to combine these two fields and stimulate production in this area, the works developed by ResiduaLab, the Laboratory of Social Studies of Waste, which I coordinate alongside Mariana Cavalcanti at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, help to delineate a research agenda in the Global South setting out from the specificities of Rio de Janeiro. The ethnographies produced inquire into processes of urbanization and infrastructural production of the city that include the idea of 'urban ruins' and their relations to temporalities (Cavalcanti 2021) and to Olympic urbanism (Cavalcanti et al. 2020), specific modes of governance of the urban poor and the relationship to water and sewage infrastructures (Pierobon 2021; Pierobon & Fernandes 2023), urban infrastructure policies in favelas (Cavalcanti & Campos 2022; Cavalcanti 2013), infrastructural violence, eviction policies and activism (Gama 2019).

This convergence of research in the fields of urban studies, infrastructure studies and waste studies with institutional exchanges between research groups and continuous collective dialogues, involving the training of researchers, development of postgraduate courses and production of publications, has led to the development of a new field of studies. As a development of this combined work, our research turned to the anthropology of urban water. We have been conducting research in this area since 2021, culminating in a more substantial collective research project centred on the history of the urbanization of Rio de Janeiro's central region and contemporary urban dynamics seen through water and its infrastructures.<sup>18</sup> This consolidates a theoretical and ethnographic investment, but also an institutional and political commitment, based on the networked collaboration of researchers from ResiduaLab and the associated research groups.

Drawing from this experience, I propose to return to the anthropology of waste in order to, by way of conclusion, think about residual infrastructures and the politics of waste more broadly as a politics of knowledge. The presentation of the laboratories and research of partners and students who make up this network may appear dislocated, but is significant insofar as, like wastes and cities, this knowledge is also produced in a localized terrain with its own specificities and differences. Here again "material specificity matters for action" (Liboiron 2016: 5) and as a racialized woman, mother and academic in Brazil, I should

<sup>16</sup> This studies group was formed in 2019 under the coordination of Camila Pierobon, Mariana Cavalcanti, Julia O'Donnell and Marcella Araújo.

<sup>17</sup> The network is composed by Grupo Casa (IESP/UERJ), URBANO (PPGSA/UFRJ) and ResiduaLab (PPCIS/UERJ).

<sup>18</sup> This is the research project "Hydric infrastructures: urban water and the production of the city in Rio de Janeiro" financed by the Support Program for Thematic Projects of the Rio de Janeiro State Research Support Program (FAPERJ) in 2022, coordinated by Mariana Cavalcanti.

point to some of the implications of how these specificities matter, highlighting how we – as women scientists and as members of research groups and universities situated in the Global South – produce knowledge about Anthropocenic urban landscapes and the huge challenges of living in the era of climate change in cities and countries of the South. Moreover, it is we, situated here, who experience and live these challenges, who make research a continuous way of acting with the people and populations affected by these processes. This foregrounds the context in which knowledge is produced and its potential role.

The local universities and research centres are knowledge production infrastructures and as such participate in the politics of waste of cities in the Global South. As kinds of infrastructures, these laboratories, research centres and universities are themselves traversed by colonialisms and unequal power structures that ground the geopolitics of scientific knowledge. These unequal infrastructures of knowledge production subtly continue to subalternize us through language and through institutional asymmetries in economic, social, symbolic and political capital, which limits the reach and circulation of our academic output. Given this situation, scientists and research centres situated in Latin America, suffering from precarious material conditions and underinvestment, are grateful to those who make possible the tools and platforms that operate an ‘anti-restricted access’ policy vis-à-vis scientific content. This allows high-level science to be undertaken in dialogue with the major centres of the Global North, even amid systematic attempts at exclusion, invisibilization and extractivisms.

Populations affected by climate collapse do not want to simply move somewhere else as a solution: they want to obtain just, secure and dignified living conditions that allow them to remain living in the localities where they have historical, material, symbolic and affective connections in the world. Likewise, scientists from the Global South do not want to migrate to the ‘centres’ to make science: they want to possess equitable and fair working conditions in the universities where they work so that they can assist and politically strengthen the affected populations through the knowledge constructed with them. Science, after all, when liberated from the illusory bindings of technical neutrality that make it primarily a corporate asset, can politically serve the welfare of the population and the reparation of a world in climate collapse. A commons science made with people and for people along with other species and forms of life.

It is in this sense that the research groups of the Global South form part of the residual infrastructures of the politics of waste. Universities have a role in exercising institutional and scientific support to politically strengthen affected populations and civil society movements, especially since these groups remain vulnerable to the lobbying of those who always and increasingly profit from catastrophes and the failed technological solutions that they invent in response to them.

In this text I have argued that waste is a doubly privileged object, both for *knowing* the world and understanding Anthropocenic urban landscapes and for *acting* in the world on the basis of this knowledge, forging a politics of knowledge that is not detached from transformative/reparative action.<sup>19</sup> Activists from the Global South reject the term ‘climate change’ in favour of ‘climate justice’ and increasingly look to set the climate agenda in terms of reparation through financial compensation. Communities directly affected by climate crises must be compensated for the losses they experience. However, investments that neither aim to go beyond reparation for damages nor include the potentialization and systematic stimulation of actions that produce real changes in the everyday making of people’s lives, seeking to avoid future harm, will be insufficient.<sup>20</sup>

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19 The convergence here is clear with proposals for knowledge production committed to an ‘anti-colonial’ (Liboiron 2021) or ‘decolonial’ (Quijano 2005; Ferdinand 2022) approach. However, these categories can be appropriated as mere labels or ‘currents of thought,’ emptying them of any critical political meaning. For this reason, I prefer to define the residual as a politics of knowledge linked to transformative/reparative action.

20 One of the positive points of the UN Climate Conference - COP 27 in Egypt was the agreement to create a fund for losses and damages for developing countries to compensate for the destructive effects of climate change.

In recent years, we have been through a politics of extermination from the Jair Bolsonaro government. A necropolitics designed to destroy the set of infrastructures that guarantee health, environmental conservation, culture, employment, social policies, education, science and technology, the safety of women, black populations, LGBTQIA+, indigenous peoples, quilombolas, residents of favelas and urban peripheries, peasants and small rural producers. The politics of waste should be understood and mobilized, therefore, in all its ethical density, as a politics of life, the guarantee of forms of life in the Anthropocene. A politics that produces a governance that is not residual (Hecht 2018a) and forges infrastructures in which people are not disposable (Doherty 2017) but who are the centre of production of knowledge, values and the technopolitics of life.

On January 1, 2023, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva climbed the ramp of the Presidential Palace in Brasilia to become the president of Brazil for the third time after a close and heroic victory over Jair Bolsonaro, who failed in his bid for re-election. During the ceremony, Lula did not walk up the ramp alone. Alongside him, as well as his wife, the sociologist Rosângela da Silva, were the Kayapó indigenous leader Raoni Metuktire, a black child, a teacher, a cook, an artisan, a disabled activist and digital influencer, a metalworker and a waste picker.<sup>21</sup> The presidential sash was passed from hand to hand, in a representation of the Brazilian people in all their diversity, until reaching Aline Souza. This black woman, wearing a t-shirt with the flag of the National Recyclable Material Waste Pickers Movement, then placed the sash on Lula, inducting him as the new head of the nation. Merrily accompanying the group was the mongrel dog Resistance.

This scene encapsulates the extremely hard challenges at stake in the contemporary global scenario. But it also captures alternative ways of doing politics in the era of climate collapse and the return of supremacist ghosts. Here the knowledge of those situated at the grassroots is essential, people who know better than anyone the ways in which we can continue to resist in order to exist. This collective work must be passed from hand to hand, ensuring the contribution of all. There is no solution if it is not collective, fair and inclusive.

Cities like Rio de Janeiro were fashioned by infrastructures founded on colonialisms and racialized structures of inequalities that still persist and continue to shape the life of peripheral populations. Amid the ruined promises of modernity and the violence of climate crises that wreak havoc on cities, invisibilized people find their worlds expropriated, removed, contaminated and relegated to the margins. It is in the residual, in the knowledge produced from the experiences, insights and struggles of these people, that anthropology can encounter other imaginaries and other possible paths and thereby contribute to alternative ways of living and inhabiting the world in response to such uncertain futures. In this sense, the anthropology of waste, as an epistemology of the Anthropocene and a politics of knowledge, confronts a task as challenging as it is necessary.

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<sup>21</sup> The child Francisco Carlos do Nascimento e Silva, the teacher Murilo de Quadros Jesus, the cook Jucimara Fausto dos Santos, the artisan Flávio Pereira, the influencer Ivan Baron, the metalworker Wesley Viesba Rodrigues Rocha, and the waste picker Aline Sousa.

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