

RESEARCH

Politics of fear in Brazil: Far-right conspiracy theories on COVID-19

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In this article, we present an analysis of narratives mobilised by extreme right-wing leader Jair Bolsonaro and his supporters in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, from March to December 2020. Our research indicates that, throughout that year, despite changes in the categories used, fear was continuously mobilised by the Brazilian president connecting an alleged ‘communist conspiracy’ to the coronavirus pandemic by creating narratives around the terms ‘Chinese virus’ and ‘Chinese vaccine’. Mapping these conspiratorial discourses, we hope to better understand (1) how Bolsonaro converts conspiracy theories into official state discourse as well as public policy, and (2) how Bolsonaro and his mediatic representatives weaponise tensions between individual freedom and public healthcare and the scientific community. Taking this scenario into account, we analyse how Bolsonaro uses social fear during the pandemic as part of his permanent campaign in a process resulting in serious risks to both public health and democracy.

Key words COVID-19 pandemic • Brazil • Bolsonaro • conspiracy theories • public health

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If I catch [COVID-19], that is my business, not anyone else's.¹

Jair Bolsonaro, 16 March 2020

Fear, insecurity and neoliberalism in Brazil

'Each family must protect their elderly rather than place this responsibility on the state', the Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro said in an interview with a popular TV show on 8 April 2020.² In the interview, he conveys the idea that each family is responsible for their own healthcare, despite the fact that healthcare is a constitutionally assured right, secured by pre-Bolsonaro state infrastructure. This and other remarks by the president express a vision of the state as bearing no responsibility towards its population during the pandemic, particularly the sick, elderly, children and other vulnerable demographics. According to this perspective, the state would not be responsible for any individual's care, placing citizens' protection solely on themselves.

The perspective adopted in this discourse is that the economy's failure would be more lethal than the pandemic. Concerning Bolsonaro's seemingly coherent idea of defending the poor and maintaining jobs, it needs to be remarked that he and his base initially blocked emergency aid to those under or slightly above the poverty line. Aid to these groups was only accepted several months into the pandemic and for a limited period³ – providing additional evidence of his perception of the poor not as citizens worth protecting but as essential engines in the national market.

Brazil stands today as a relevant case in the discussion surrounding the relationship between health and state during the COVID-19 pandemic. Its Unified Health System (Sistema Único de Saúde, SUS in Portuguese) is the largest public and universal (that is, free of any cost for any person, including foreigners) healthcare system in the world – and that clashes with the current neoliberal project of federal public services privatisation in Brazil. The SUS was created in 1988 in the promulgation process of the new democratic federal constitution after 21 years of dictatorship (Paim, 2018). Even before the rise of Bolsonaro, a series of cuts in healthcare public investments were implemented, following different pressures by neoliberal segments. However, the pandemic evidenced the need for actions and investment on the part of the state in confronting such a health crisis, forcing countries to rethink their models of primary healthcare assistance and vaccine distribution.

The neoliberal state model can be described as having two goals or rationalities: the reduction of expenditures on social protection, including social investments, and the enhancement of free markets and individual action. The model's application does not necessarily make the state smaller, but it reorganises the state apparatus, redirecting social security public funds onto other sectors (Wacquant, 2012). This impacts citizens' lives in a myriad of ways. In particular, the reorganisation instils citizens with an ethos characterised by consumerism and individualism, as noted by Brown and Baker (2012). Thus, neoliberalism is not only an economic reconfiguration, but

also a psychological one, modifying individual projects and the self. These changes are framed as a natural and inevitable fate of individuals. As a result, what were formerly the responsibilities of the state are now transferred onto individuals and families (Cooper, 2017).

Questions and concerns about the neoliberal state and its way of life have been around for several decades of course. But, amid a pandemic, they became impossible to ignore. After all, in a crisis on this scale, it seems that the safest and most effective way to proceed would be to rely on collective and public structures, grounded in state policies and management, to stop the contagion wave. In a pandemic, it seems logical, though potentially unsettling, to see the increase of government action on all fronts. Governments around the world embraced these expectations, elaborating public policies to deal with COVID-19, prioritising their population's health.

A pandemic shifts the social paradigm of risk. Ulrich Beck's work provides an important discussion on how a new semantic of risk has been established in collective life in recent years. According to Beck (2003), this time could be defined as living the experiential dimension of risk on everyday life's sensations and experiences. In those circumstances, risk and fear are beyond mere sensations and emotions, becoming more political tools. As Marta Nussbaum (2018) notes, politicians may use strategic rhetoric, choosing to mobilise specific uncertainties. Leaders can affect the perception of risk in a community, and the accompanying feelings of fear and insecurity that go with it, to their own political or even personal agenda. In other words: fear can be interpreted as a threat to both democracy and collective action.

The changes produced by general fear can be interpreted through classical sociological works. Despite its limited applicability to circumstances in the Global South, Zygmunt Bauman's theory that the postmodern world would replace the security of a 'modern' life has proved accurate in many ways there, as much as in the North. The 'solid modernity' discussed by Bauman did not develop fully in the Brazilian context, thus, the modern response to a contemporary crisis demands adjustments. Another one of his theories, 'Titanic syndrome' or 'the contemporary fear of a general and inevitable catastrophe', makes those very limitations evident. The idea of a catastrophe, the end of the world and society as one knows it, changes definitions according to the subject's gender, location, class, race, culture and generation. Even though it offers an important analytical tool, it is up to each researcher to adapt this theory to the analysed context. In the current circumstances, Bauman's ideas need complementary contextual information to help interpret the psychosocial circumstances of the pandemic. After all, the fears that poor people experience are very different from those of richer citizens.

While the idea of a looming catastrophe poses a global risk, the ways in which different countries are exposed to its consequences vary, exacerbating already existing inequalities. This is underlined in the *Coronavirus vaccines: expect delays* report (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021) projecting the future of COVID-19 immunisation worldwide. As of writing moment, ten vaccines have been approved or are in the process of being approved by different regulatory agencies. Still, only the richest countries, including the US, those of the EU and the UK, will be able to fully vaccinate their populations by the end of 2021. Middle-income countries such as Mexico and Brazil are expected to be able to vaccinate their entire populations by 2022. The poorest countries might not start vaccinations on a significant scale before 2023.

Bauman's notion of a catastrophe takes on specific contours in Brazil. In the first two months of the pandemic, three health ministers were appointed and left office. From June to December 2020, the ministry was headed by a military officer without medical training. In fact, Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello even stated in a press conference that he had never heard about SUS before being appointed minister, claiming his ignorance was a product of his access to the exclusive military healthcare programme.

Recent research conducted by [Ventura and Reis \(2021\)](#) not only highlights the Brazilian government negligent management of the pandemic, but also reveals the existence of an institutional strategy of intentionally spreading the virus promoted by the Bolsonaro government. This claim is based on a rigorous study that analysed 3,049 federal legal norms produced in 2020. The authors highlight three areas of federal action that resulted in exacerbating the spread of the virus. They materialised in terms of public policies and legal frameworks in: (1) normative federal acts that included dismantling or vetoing former federal regulations; (2) acts of obstruction to state and municipal actions to control the pandemic; and (3) propaganda against public health, which included spreading misinformation to discredit health authorities and weakening popular adherence to health recommendations by national and international public health organisations.

In recent years, Brazil has gone through a deep economic and political crisis, laying the foundation for a severe democratic crossroads that reached its apex with Bolsonaro's election in 2018 ([Hunter and Power, 2019](#)). Bolsonaro's campaign was marked by the mobilisation of historic fears regarding economic crises, along with a combination of an alleged 'communist threat' and the need for a 'moral anti-gender crusade' to help gather support in opposition to the PT (Workers Party) – the left-wing party in power between 2003 and 2016 ([Corrêa and Kalil, 2020](#)). Bolsonaro's conservative political platform represents an opposition to human rights activism including gender equality, indigenous rights, affirmative actions, LGBTQI+ rights and environmental concerns.

During the pandemic, Bolsonaro continued his political mobilisation of fears in actions he refers to as 'a defence of the traditional family' (in the form of anti-gender, anti-LGBTQI+, anti-indigenous statements) and in relation to economic guidelines (mobilising fear of unemployment, inflation, pay cuts, raises in living costs). As we show, in addition to these two agendas, Bolsonaro mobilised the fear of the pandemic itself by converting conspiracy theories into official state rhetoric. These conspirational narratives are being used to guide governmental responses to COVID-19 in Brazil, converting them into public policies. Our analysis focuses on the period that coincides with the worsening of the country's health crisis, from the moment the WHO (World Health Organization) declared a pandemic in March 2020 to the period prior to the start of local vaccination efforts in December 2020.

Methodology

Jair Bolsonaro's use of different communication strategies to create, sustain and direct feelings, or affects, for his own political gain has been the subject of a significant body of academic research. In previous works, we investigated through extensive hybrid ethnographic research (online and offline) the communication strategies used by Bolsonaro between 2016 and 2018. As a result, our research identified the campaign

segmentation based on 16 voter profiles and its dissemination via WhatsApp and social media. Despite the apparent lack of coherence and inconsistencies in Bolsonaro's public pronouncements, targeted messages towards specific groups made him able to connect with the diverse aspirations and fears of different supporter profiles (Kalil, 2018).

Two recent examples can be found in Silva's (2020) historic outline of Bolsonaro's 'pragmatics of chaos' since the 1980s, and Borba's (2020) notable examination of Bolsonaro's efforts to increase discrimination against the LGBTQI+ community. These analyses are based on a semiotic tradition whose methodology reflect works such as Jan Blommaert's (2020) model of communicability in political discourse. They focus on unveiling communication strategies through exploring of meaning construction and circulation. In a different research corpus, Piia Varis' recent analysis of Donald Trump's social media (Varis, 2020) and Leticia Cesarino's article (2019) on digital populism unveil the formation of contentious new political communication arenas, a topic which is also relevant in our analysis.

Our article aims to complement this extensive body of work with a more comprehensive focus on narrative developments, by examining how these developments increase tensions between Bolsonaro, his opponents, supporters and the media. Our methodology applies a 'controversy mapping' approach, finding inspiration in the ethnographic work of anthropologists Bruno Latour (2005) and Tommaso Venturini (2010). The sociology developed from 'controversy mapping' has the goal of studying moments of effervescence, conflict, crisis, destabilisation or disruption.

These are moments in which a diverse and new set of actors, representing a broad range of positions, enter the public sphere, creating a demand for new categories and reflections. Unveiling this network of blooming interactions is what 'controversy mapping' entails. Each controversy, as Latour (2005) points out, is a pathway towards and through the identification of actors and the arguments produced by them. Accessing said controversies with accuracy demands a focus not necessarily on the causes and arguments themselves, but the connections and disruptions between the players involved in the controversy being mapped.

This approach allows for the observation of a complex fabric through which networks of both 'human and non-human' elements flourish, building new lenses to access and process the everchanging world around them. Mapping controversies or, in this case, 'following the actors' (meaning players, institutions, individuals, narratives or even viruses and vaccines) wherever they may lead, 'taking them seriously' in their critical and social dimensions, can lead to a better understanding of how they continuously perform and navigate new spaces of tension.

In this research, we take Bolsonaro as a privileged actor, analysing his official speeches, interviews, public statements and his social media posts during the pandemic. In the period from March to December 2020, Bolsonaro gave ten live official speeches on free-to-air TV and radio.⁴ Of these, nine were directly linked to the pandemic, and therefore qualified as object for analysis. They are the pronouncements of 6, 12, 24 and 31 March; 8 and 16 April; 12 August; 7 September; and 24 December. Additionally, we mapped hundreds of excerpts from Bolsonaro's statements from the press, exclusive interviews for radio and different television broadcast and statements on social media, such as live videos on Facebook and tweets on Twitter during that same time.

To analyse the references to conspiracy theories by the Brazilian president, it was necessary to examine the most shared theories on the internet, according to data

collected from Brazilian fact-check agencies, focusing on the period from March to December 2020. The data was obtained by crossing two sources. First, we looked for conspiracy narratives and fake news about the virus and related vaccines in three Brazilian fact-checking agencies: Aos Fatos, Lupa and Boatos.org. Then we searched for Twitter and Facebook public posts from Bolsonaro's supporters which reproduced extracts from these narratives on these social media platforms.

From this investigation, it was possible to define two distinct moments in the profusion of conspiracy theories, rumours and false news. From March to July 2020, narratives focused on the onset of the disease and the origin of the virus, blaming China for the pandemic. From July to December 2020, narratives circulated about vaccine development and testing in Brazil in partnership with the Chinese pharmaceutical industry Sinovac.

Conspiracy theories on COVID-19 in Brazil: the 'Chinese virus'

Much like the HIV crisis in the 1980s and 1990s (Heller, 2015), the COVID-19 pandemic generated conspiracies with both national and global roots and implications. Certain theories present a tone of denial and place responsibility on the media for exaggerating the potential for contagion or the number of casualties. Others denounce the 'international creation' of the new coronavirus by private labs or the Chinese government. Finally, some believe that a coronavirus vaccine will cause 'more harm than good'.⁵

In the case of the profusion of misinformation about China, Pinheiro-Machado's (2020) work revealed how epidemics, contagious diseases and health crises are moments that reveal racism and stigmas in what she defines as a specific type of xenophobia: Sinophobia. The author investigates how China has been represented in Brazil by the media and common sense since the 2000s. This period coincides with the deepening of ties between the two countries through the formation of BRICS, an economic and political organisation of emerging economies that includes Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

Therefore, it is important to briefly discuss how conspiracy theories can be categorised, including their origins and some contexts of propagation. The expression 'conspiracy theory' was coined and popularised in the 1960s (Hofstadter, 1964). Its proliferation occurred largely as a result of the intense media coverage around President John F. Kennedy's assassination, a historic moment that gave rise to many different rumours. Throughout that decade, several researchers elaborated different approaches to conspiracy discourses, taking into consideration their influence in the public sphere and contemporary politics.

Hofstadter (1964) argues that conspiracy claims usually arise from 'common sense' and are commonly mobilised by populist and alarmist leadership. These narratives can be highly effective because individuals, due to several reasons – including a general lack of information and bureaucratic barriers – have little access to the political decision-making process. However, other researchers disagree that the belief in conspiracy theories is linked to specific issues of institutional structure. Rather, they argue that such theories rely on subjective causes that propel their success. Clarke (2002), for example, holds that people believe in conspiracy theories because of the intense emotions and affinities they awaken, particularly the empowering sensation of discovering a supposed secret, a piece of information that, until then, was exclusive

only to those who hold power. Another important feeling to be considered is a sense of belonging to a community (Barkun, 2003).

Girardet (1987) argues that political myths of conspiracy play a predominantly explanatory role, making sense of extraordinary contexts and synthesising sentiments of collective insecurity and fear – typical of crisis situations, conflict or social transformation. It is also useful to draw a parallel to Iasbeck's (2000) reflections on rumours. The author states that rumours and conspiracy discourse arise in contexts of social effervescence and great tension. These are extraordinary moments that jolt people's symbolic horizons, frustrate expectations and disseminate feelings of insecurity regarding the future, providing an 'enemy' fully responsible for the chaos, whose atonement would reconstitute social order.

Epidemics are equally exemplary as conjunctures of emotional effervescence and, consequentially, favourable to the diffusion of conspiracy theories. In the 1980s, the HIV epidemic, for example, allowed diverse conspiracy theories to flourish, some of which still stand today. A conspiracy would explain, for example, the origin of the virus, understood by many narratives as a deliberate creation (Goertzel, 1994). Simultaneously, other stories put into question the epidemic's reality, occupying the same realm of theories denying the existence and danger of AIDS (Kalichman, 2009).

In Brazil, a transformed version of the 'Chinese virus' conspiratorial narrative, as sustained by former US President Donald Trump, has gained space in the Bolsonarist movement. Because China is currently Brazil's most prominent trading partner, Bolsonaro is unable to speak openly about a Chinese conspiracy involving the WHO or about China's supposed gains from a 'western' economic collapse during the world health crisis. Alternatively, the Brazilian president works to present conspiracies against fellow compatriots, at times, members of his own government and Brazil itself, mobilising previous narratives that have affinities with Trumpism's 'Chinese virus' idea.

Bolsonaro's supporters talked about the 'Chinese virus' to insinuate that the new coronavirus had been artificially created to undermine Western economies and reinforce China's economic position. But it was not until on 18 March this rhetoric officially breached the inner circles of government, when Brazilian Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro, one of the president's children, made use of this narrative. Roughly a week after Mike Pompeo's first use of 'Wuhan virus', Bolsonaro retweeted a Twitter thread accusing the Chinese government of trying to suppress information on the spread of COVID-19 during the first few months of the epidemic in China.⁶ He compared the 'coronavirus' spread to the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl, referring to the HBO series on the historical incident, to state that the Chinese would have tried to suppress information that could have saved lives. His post proposes a dichotomy between 'communist dictatorships' that would 'cause deaths' in opposition to capitalism, free nations and 'freedom'. In his public declaration, Bolsonaro compared the pandemic outbreak to a cybersecurity breach while vaguely suggesting that China developed the virus as a biological weapon.

Government officials seemed wary of this narrative, and understandably so. China represents the destination of roughly 27 per cent of Brazilian exports, against 11 per cent of exports directed at the US in 2018.⁷ The politically problematic adoption of the narrative was made clear by the Chinese embassy in Brazil, which issued a statement the next day advising Eduardo Bolsonaro to look for scientific information and change strategies, as 'history teaches that those who insist on attacking and humiliating the Chinese people always end up shooting their own foot'.⁸

The tone adopted by the federal government suddenly changed: President Bolsonaro, along his staff and children, stopped speaking about the ‘China virus’. However, like Trump, they started referring to undisclosed ‘enemies’, who were using the pandemic as a political opportunity. During this period, Brazil’s leader tried to present conspiracies against fellow compatriots; at times, members of his own government. These examples make it clear that the pandemic’s political mobilisation through fear does not centre on the virus itself, but on elements around it. The ‘enemies of freedom’, ‘the enemies of the nation’ and the ‘enemies of the government’ in this scenario are the media conglomerates, pro-public-health measures from local governments and the public individuals defending social distancing.

In Brazil, Trumpist conspiracy theories and accusations related to the ‘Chinese virus’ feed on anti-communist and nationalist conceptions, all ideological pillars of Bolsonarist rhetoric. Bolsonaro’s speeches are frequently allude to ‘communist corruption’, characterised by social and national misery, and ‘American freedom’, characterised by economic and moral success. They also rely on a notion of ‘globalism’, understood as global networks of influence aimed at undermining nation states, ‘liberty’ and ‘Western civilisation’. The notion of ‘globalism’ and the way Bolsonaro joins the Trumpist communication strategy raises important questions about the phenomenon of ‘globalization of conspiracy theories’ which includes QAnon and other online far-right communities.

As part of the ‘globalization of conspiracy theories’, the ‘Chinese virus’ narratives provide an opportunity for Bolsonaro and his supporters to frame the political debate as a war. This strategy is exploited through the following elements: (1) a rapprochement between Brazil and Trump’s US, establishing them as allies against external ‘common enemies’ (China); (2) equating China with political and moral corruption based on a narrative that the Chinese Communist Party created the virus to undermine conservative leaders, supplanting Western individual freedoms and implementing an authoritarian global regime;⁹ and (3) targeting the media,¹⁰ opposing governors and mayors as ‘internal enemies’, depicting them as authoritarians for adopting social distance measures.

This strategy is formed by narratives that not only target Bolsonaro’s ‘enemies’. They also propagate the idea that these ‘enemies’ – the media, political opposition, China, the WHO – are trying to undermine the Brazilian economy through both spreading a virus and then causing overreactions to hamper economic activity. The narratives help to reinforce the notion that the real emergency is not the pandemic, but the actions urged by the WHO and the negative economic consequences of these actions. According to these narratives, there is an alliance between ‘communist enemies’, which more than ever are united to destroy – under the pretext of public health – the ‘freedom’ allegedly offered in the US, by Trump, and, in Brazil, by Bolsonaro.

We can also observe a double movement in Bolsonaro’s strategies: first, they adopt new conspiracy theories in connection to previously established narratives as a way of creating an image of Bolsonaro as holder and provider of truth, in opposition to other parts of the public and state administration. Meanwhile, second, they target the media, governors, mayors and those who do not support the government’s policy by labelling them ‘communists’, ‘globalists’, ‘corrupt’ enemies responsible for the pandemic situation and its economic effects.

This double movement is visible, for example, in Bolsonaro’s speech at the UN General Assembly on 22 September 2020. Constrained from taking stronger,

clearer, geopolitical stands, Bolsonaro focused on unnamed enemies, framing the Brazilian press as agents of chaos who ‘politicised the virus, spreading panic among the population’. His speech offered a parallel narrative against the WHO guidelines, and added the concern with the pandemic’s economic consequences. Bolsonaro stated he had been worried about the economy ‘since the beginning’ and that both the ‘virus and unemployment’ must be treated ‘simultaneously and with the same accountability’. He argued that his government’s policies and discourse, effectively by fighting against the WHO’s recommendations and scientific advice, ‘saved the country from a greater evil’. According to his logic, whoever disagrees would be attempting to profit politically from the pandemic; whoever argues for the WHO guidelines would be neglecting and, thus, responsible for economic despair; whoever points out that the state could use resources to deal with the pandemic’s economic and social consequences would be a potential enemy of ‘freedom’.

In a nutshell, Bolsonaro converts parts of conspiracy narratives into official state discourse, much like Donald Trump. But unlike the former US president, Bolsonaro cannot speak directly about China. Therefore, he uses his platform to hint at the ‘Chinese virus’ conspiracy while publicly attacking other ‘enemies’, directing Brazilians’ fear towards the economy and establishing the nation’s enemies as the opposition, the media and the WHO, which are all, ostensibly, related to China. These actions further deepen the state’s failure and point individuals as the primary caretakers of human life. Using variations of the ‘Chinese virus’ narratives, Bolsonaro and his supporters manage to create a new problem around COVID-19, avoiding responsibility for their political actions, in defence of a neoliberal and authoritarian model of state, economy and the self.

The controversy around COVID-19’s origins has an element both perverse and artificial. The accusatory designation ‘Chinese virus’ proffered by a myriad of state officials in different corners of the globe goes beyond racism and xenophobia. The power of these remarks, used as tools in commercial and political battles, reside in the creation of a conspiracy plot that incites defiance of protocols and security procedures created by international institutions, while blaming China for the disease’s nefarious effects. Those accusations have the role of defaming international institutions, like the WHO, as ‘naive’ or in ‘collusion’ with China, forging evidence that would demonstrate their ‘limitations’ or even bad faith in how they managed the pandemic.

Conspiracy theories on COVID-19 in Brazil: ‘Chinese vaccine’

In mapping the conspiracy theories about vaccines against COVID-19, it is evident that the narratives circulating in Brazil are related to anti-vaccine discourses in other countries, especially in the United States. But although they are common narratives – such as theories involving a supposed social control plan by Microsoft’s founder Bill Gates – the Brazilian context presents specificities due to subnational political disputes and the geopolitics of vaccine development. In the Brazilian case, throughout the period analysed in this article, two vaccines were in the process of being approved by the country’s national regulatory agency: Sinovac/Coronavac and Oxford/AstraZeneca.

In Brazil, the narratives surrounding COVID-19 have gradually shifted from a focus on the idea of a ‘Chinese virus’ to a ‘Chinese vaccine’. This movement took place in a specific political context, involving disputes between Jair Bolsonaro and

São Paulo's governor and potential 2022 presidential candidate João Dória. São Paulo is the state with the country's largest population and highest GDP. Although Dória and Bolsonaro have been political allies in the past, tensions between them intensified after the governor adopted social distancing policies and announced, in June 2020, a partnership with the Chinese laboratory Sinovac to produce the Coronavac vaccine in São Paulo.

In response, President Bolsonaro and his supporters intensified attacks against the governor, spreading disinformation about Sinovac/Coronavac. In a coordinated effort to attack Sinovac/Coronavac, Bolsonaro's supporters started referring to it both as 'vachina' (combination of the words 'vaccine' and 'China'), and as 'Dória's vaccine'. Throughout 2020, Bolsonaro made clear the federal government would not finance or support Coronavac's production in Brazil. Moreover, he would not allow the federal government to negotiate the purchase of shots produced in Brazil in partnership with Sinovac.¹¹ This position was reiterated every week in live video streams on the president's Facebook profile. Even though anti-vaccine propaganda is present on different platforms, messaging apps and allied TV stations, these live streams have become a privileged place for Bolsonaro's denialism.

The apex of denialism was hit when Bolsonaro turned anti-vaccine conspiracy theories into public policy by refusing a delivery of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. In 2020, between August and November, the federal government rejected three sale proposals in which Pfizer even offered 70 million shots of BioNTech, a fact widely reported in the press.¹² Bolsonaro's anti-vaccine position also resulted in delays to negotiate with the WHO's Covax Facility consortium. In a statement at a public event in December 2020,¹³ Bolsonaro justified the Brazilian government's refusal to purchase the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine saying:

In the Pfizer contract, it's very clear: *'we're not responsible for any side effects'*. *If you turn into a crocodile, it's your problem. If you become superhuman, if a woman starts to grow a beard or if a man starts to speak with an effeminate voice, they will not have anything to do with it.* Some people say I'm giving a bad example. But to the imbeciles, to the idiots, that say this, I tell them I've already caught the virus, I have the antibodies, so why get vaccinated? (emphasis added)

Although COVID-19 vaccines in general have been discredited by Bolsonaro and his supporters (as in the case of the statement above), we have mapped the conspiracy theories regarding the Coronavac vaccine produced by the Chinese pharmaceutical company. In the Brazilian case, a combination of elements made the Coronavac vaccine a privileged target for anti-vaccine disinformation. First, Coronavac, for its distribution contracts, presents itself, so far, as the one with the greatest potential for Brazilian immunisation. Second, some narratives supported an alleged competition between Bolsonaro's vaccine (produced by the federal government in partnership with AstraZeneca) versus 'Dória's vaccine' (produced by São Paulo's state government in partnership with Sinovac). Third, the narratives about the 'Chinese vaccine' used the fertile ground created and promoted by the notion of the 'Chinese virus'.

At least in the Brazilian case, the anti-vaccine positions defended by Bolsonaro and his supporters can be understood in the light of 'sociology of deviance' theories and 'moral entrepreneurship', based on works by Howard Becker (1963) and Stanley Cohen (2002). The notion of 'moral panic' refers to situations or events in which a

person or group is seen as a threat to moral values and, therefore, society in general. In this sense, we argue that Bolsonaro's anti-vaccine positions are guided by a logic and notion of morality similar to the one found in movements against LGBTIQ+ rights or in efforts against reproductive rights.

Thus, we assume that the formulation of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories can be understood beyond an irrational refusal to accept science or just as ignorance. Despite the existence of a multitude of conspiracy theories and narratives on vaccines circulating from July to December 2020, it is possible to understand these narratives as part of an exclusive, overused, repertoire of historically mobilised 'moral panics'. Variations on these have been used by multiple and diverse conservative groups for decades in a transnational context, this time adapted to the pandemic context and the multiple fears it raises.

Ruth Wodak (2015) argues right-wing political leaders and parties succeeded in creating fear and legitimising their policy proposals in the context of the Cold War, in a strategy reinvigorated after 9/11. Wodak retrieves previous work to analyse the language of right-wing politics legitimisation of fear through four major categories: *authorisation* (legitimation by referring to authority), *moral evaluation* (legitimation by reference to value systems), *rationalisation* (legitimation by reference to knowledge claims or arguments) and *mythopoesis* (legitimation achieved by narratives). According to Wodak (2015: 6), these narratives are 'often small stories or fragments of narrative structures about the past or future'.

Based on Wodak's perspective, we analyse the conspiracy theories corpus on vaccination circulating in Brazil as fragments of narrative structures with main and sub-types also frequently connected. We have classified the main types of narratives in circulation in Brazil into the groupings that follow.

Authoritarianism, surveillance and communism

The main corpus of conspiracy theories surrounding Coronavac is based on the idea that immunisation would be a way to insert a subcutaneous microchip into the bodies of vaccinated people. Variations of this narrative speculate that the microchip would be controlled through 5G cellphone antennas built by the Chinese company Huawei, or that the microchip would have been developed by Bill Gates as a way of tracking individuals. It is also important to note how different public enemies are mixed in the narratives: Governor Dória would be in partnership with China in a plot for population control in an alleged global communist conspiracy. It emphasises the view that technology can be used by tyrannical governments as a system for the surveillance and control of bodies.

Sexuality, human experiments and genetic mutation

The corpus of these theories is based on the false argument that the immunisation would alter human DNA, causing genetic mutations in vaccinated people or transforming them into animal and human hybrids. President Jair Bolsonaro's own speech about the alleged risks of the Pfizer vaccine mixes different conspiratorial beliefs ranging from genetic mutation to 'transforming' 'non-gay people' into 'gays' – using the categories mobilised by the president. It is important to note that

homosexuality is seen as a form of ‘unnatural’ ‘deviant behaviour’ being equated with genetic mutation and hybridism between humans and animals.

Spreading diseases

Rumours arose that some of the vaccine potential side effects include the development of other diseases and conditions, revealing a list created from deep societal fears. Among them: dementia, cancer, autism, HIV and the reframing of homosexuality as a medical condition. The rumours about the relationship between autism and vaccines return to a study published by *The Lancet* in 1998, which the journal later retracted citing inconsistencies in the work.¹⁴ In the case of rumours about autism, these narratives recover moral panics concerning children as the victims of government-imposed medicine. Part of these theories also address a variety of hypotheses that the vaccine would be a way to deliberately promote the contagion of the population with the active virus causing COVID-19.

Abortion, contraception, population control and genocide

Another set of theories claimed that the ‘powerful’ intend to use vaccinations to reduce world population through forced sterilisation or killing specific populations. The narratives unify several conspiratorial beliefs, unconfirmed information, false statements and other types of misinformation in the intersection between health and politics. They deny the seriousness of the virus and suppose that the deaths attributed to COVID-19 are part of a plot to put a vaccine in circulation capable of producing all kinds of harm that ignite the neoconservative movements’ imagination: from infertility to abortion or forced contraception measures. Of these narratives, those that stand out are the ones about fetal cells. This conspiracy theory has variations which include the idea that the vaccine would be produced from the cells of aborted human foetuses.

Closing remarks

In this article, we have discussed the mobilisation of fear during the pandemic having Brazil as an analytical focus following the most common conspiracy theories about the coronavirus’ alleged origins and immunisation. Using variations of the ‘Chinese virus’ and ‘Chinese vaccine’ conspiratorial narratives, Bolsonaro and his supporters managed to create a new problem around COVID-19 placing the virus itself as a secondary issue. As a chief of state, Bolsonaro not only amplified these false narratives, but turned them into official state discourse and public policy.

This antagonism reinforces the conclusions of recent works showing how disinformation shared through WhatsApp is connected to the far-right political discourse in Brazil, framing COVID-19 as a political issue rather than a public health one. When Bolsonaro asks for the full return of productivity and normality, calling the reaction to the pandemic a ‘hysteria’, he makes a political choice and profits from an array of fears: unemployment, hunger, criminality and death as possible effects of quarantine. That is a way of shielding his government from the pandemic’s consequences as well as placing part of the population at ease by naturalising the idea that, inevitably, ‘the weak would die’ and the healthy and young should not worry.

As a chief of state he is avoiding responsibility for political actions, in defence of a general neoliberal and authoritarian model of state and the self.

As it pertains to the awareness of the political use of fear, Nussbaum (2018: 44–5) points out one extremely important element: whoever talks about fear must be trustworthy. Fear is not a negative or positive feeling; it can be used in both ways, grounded on false or real information, and it can be used to produce appropriate or inappropriate actions. Fear has the power to move humans deeply. In this context, as the state draws away from social matters and individuals are made responsible for their own lives, growing feelings of insecurity propel politically usable fears, becoming fertile ground for the rise of conspiracy theories.

When dealing with the pandemic, Degerman et al (2020) proposes a reanalysis of theoretical approaches to fear in philosophy. In a critical dialogue with authors like Baumann and Nussbaum, among others, the authors argue that fear should not be taken as ‘irrational’ as opposed to politics, which would be in the field of ‘rational’. The authors propose analysing politics beyond the rationality *versus* irrationality dichotomy. Thus, they ask that the collective fear experienced in the pandemic should not only be understood just as ignorance or lack of knowledge.

Approaches that try to escape the dichotomies of irrationality versus politics or science versus obscurantism¹⁵ have the potential to provide new frameworks for understanding conspiracy theories. In this sense, instead of assuming that disinformation should be combated only with information or that science could replace the social space of paranoia and conspiracies, it is about understanding the politics of fear in its own dynamics. This perspective leads us to the interpretation of conspiracy theories surrounding the subject of vaccines, in addition to being misinformation, as occupying, at least, a double role: they serve the interests of maintaining conservative moral panics and reinforce a specific perspective regarding the state, governments and society.

In recent Brazilian history, health has become increasingly individualised. This point of view is likely to have contributed to the resistance towards vaccinations, mask use and other methods of social protection that rely on collective action, placing an underinformed and highly anxious general public in a danger the dimensions of which most cannot fathom. Mapping controversies around the inherent contradiction of the neoliberal definition of government can allow researchers to better understand how actors in power play with social fear and how these fears can be mobilised by politicians in a crisis scenario.

We attempted to map these controversies in the context of Bolsonaro’s Brazil in 2020. We showed how the problematics of the pandemic develop from and around previous narratives promoted by Bolsonaro and his supporter base, mobilising different fears and feelings of insecurity. We could observe two overarching narrative stands that aim at both external and internal enemies, embodied specially in a ‘communist threat’ to a vague idea of freedom. Although this initially developed around narratives of a ‘Chinese virus’, these were gradually substituted with mentions of a ‘Chinese vaccine’. The latter was used specially to attack São Paulo state Governor João Dória, seen as an alternative to Bolsonaro in the 2022 elections.

While constructing a stance against general opposition, Bolsonaro and the federal government continue their permanent campaign in the public sphere as champions of ‘individual freedom’, placing responsibility on the population, chronic state dependency and the necessity to keep working and save jobs as a way to save lives.

The presidential discourses maintained the idea that each individual is responsible for themselves. The state must only create conditions to the exercise of liberty. Meanwhile, that liberty is accomplished in praxis only in the market and work, not in public or collective life. In opposition to Bolsonaro, local and state governments follow the WHO's recommendations (social distancing, quarantine, avoid spreading rumours, check sources, among others), but did not offer the perfect conditions for citizens to follow them. These discrepancies give Bolsonaroists the necessary leeway to promote their cause as the only way to proceed. In a pandemic situation, stakes are raised even higher, leaving, in a humanitarian perspective, individuals abandoned to their own fates.

Notes

- ¹ All of the president's statements in this article have been translated by the authors.
- ² The interview is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_Mq3XFlbKU
- ³ For more information about public assistantship in Brazil during the coronavirus crisis, see Cardozo, 2020.
- ⁴ The announcements can be seen in full by accessing: www.gov.br/planalto/pt-br/acompanhe-o-planalto/pronunciamentos
- ⁵ In the case of Brazil, conspiracies were not only produced around the supposed deliberate 'production' of the virus in laboratories. There were also, and to a great extent, different discourses surrounding crisis-management measures, which linked them to supposed strategies that China was employing to spread the coronavirus. Among them, we highlight narratives that face masks and respirators shipped from China would be purposefully contaminated with the virus and, more recently, that Chinese vaccines would be designed to infect rather than protect. Across social media, these narratives proposed that people did not use masks and did not trust any measures with possible links to China. In this regard, these narratives and proposals promoted general mistrust of healthcare, something that was also endorsed by President Bolsonaro, for example when he encouraged citizens to break into hospitals to check information.
- ⁶ One of the most prominent political figures around Jair Bolsonaro, Eduardo was tipped for the Brazilian embassy in the US during 2019 and had continuous contact with the Trump administration as well as with Steve Bannon. His tweet can be found at <https://twitter.com/bolsonarosp/status/1240286560953815040>
- ⁷ These numbers are offered by the Harvard Atlas of Economic Complexity: <https://atlas.cid.harvard.edu/countries/32/export-basket>
- ⁸ This refers to one of a series of tweets posted by the embassy and retweeted by Ambassador Yang Wanming. They can be found here: <https://twitter.com/EmbaixadaChina/status/1240766626708021255>, <https://twitter.com/EmbaixadaChina/status/1240766345773539328>
- ⁹ This approach allows the development of narratives aimed at causing a feeling of disgust directed at the country and stereotyping certain food and hygienic habits discursively related to it, sometimes associated with the misery caused by 'corrupt communism'. One example is the thread retweeted by Eduardo Bolsonaro that included accusations and mentions regarding the country's food markets.
- ¹⁰ The media continues to be heavily criticised and targeted during the pandemic. The other developments that we have mapped reveal how it is logical that Bolsonaro supporters would believe that the 'leftist press' approximated to notions of 'globalist' and 'communist' would be 'corruptly' lying in disclosing the number of deaths caused by

COVID-19 in Brazil and throughout the world, in collusion to the WHO and China – reduced by the thread retweeted by Eduardo as a media-controlling dictatorship.

¹¹ For more information see www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-54619730

¹² For more information see www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-54619730

¹³ The full video can be accessed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBCXkVOEH-8

¹⁴ The article ‘Lancet retracts 12-year-old article linking autism to MMR vaccines’ deals with this episode: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2831678/

¹⁵ Bruno Latour (2018) proposes reframing the understanding of conspiracy theories and adherence to far-right leaders and parties as a process that results less from just ignorance and more from insecurity in the face of the combination of three phenomena: the dismantling of the state social protection through ‘deregulation’; the increase of inequalities (including migratory movements and displacement); and climate change denialism. Although Latour does not mobilise the category ‘fear’ as central, he deals with the ‘sense of vertigo, almost of panic, that traverses all contemporary politics arising owing to the fact that the ground is giving way beneath everyone’s feet at once, as if we all felt attacked everywhere’ (Latour, 2018: 8)

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Conflict of interest

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