

## Reimagining the Social During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Scientific Denialism, Brazilian Diplomacy and the ‘Virus of Communism’

### Reimaginando o Social em Tempos de Pandemia: Negacionismo Científico, Diplomacia Brasileira e o “Vírus do Comunismo”

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#### Abstract

Examining the circulation of scientific statements during the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil from an STS perspective, the article argues that the denialism espoused by the far-right diplomatic circles of the Jair Bolsonaro administration must be understood in light of the disputes, which the virus revived, over different forms of imagining the social. I examine how the very reality of Covid-19 and the socioeconomic crisis to which it gave rise, urging governments to adopt social protection measures and strong forms of international cooperation, became the object of intense disputes between representatives of the so-called ‘anti-globalism’ in Brazil’s diplomatic institutions.

**Keywords:** scientific denialism; Covid-19 pandemic; Brazilian diplomacy; new right; Science and Technology Studies.

#### Resumo

Abordando a circulação de enunciados científicos durante a pandemia de Covid-19 a partir dos Estudos Sociais da Ciência e da Tecnologia, o artigo explora a hipótese de que o negacionismo esposado pela diplomacia brasileira, então vinculada às novas direitas extremistas à frente do poder político, deve ser lido à luz dos embates, que o vírus reativou, entre diferentes formas de imaginação sobre o social. Examinamos como a realidade mesma da Covid-19 e da crise socioeconômica por ela suscitada, instando os governos à adoção de medidas de proteção social e formas robustas de cooperação internacional, tornou-se objeto de intensas disputas entre representantes do chamado “antiglobalismo” nas instâncias diplomáticas brasileiras.

**Palavras-chave:** negacionismo científico; pandemia de Covid-19; diplomacia brasileira; novas direitas; estudos sociais da ciência e da tecnologia.

#### Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic dramatically exposed the tensions and difficulties involved in the circulation of scientific statements in the contemporary public sphere. As well as the uncertainties inherent to the emergence of a singular historical event, provoked by a previously unknown pathogen, doubts among the public concerning

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what scientists and specialists had to say were exacerbated in large part by disinformation campaigns orchestrated by factional groups both inside and outside individual countries, using new communication and information technologies. At this moment, science found itself particularly vulnerable to attacks intended to discredit it, since the daily media coverage of the pandemic, also being produced at a dizzying rate in response to a world convulsed by events, brought to light many of the complex and non-linear processes involved in the forming of a scientific consensus. Exploiting the ebb and flow typical of knowledge in the process of being constructed, social and political actors, particularly those linked to the new far right, seek to discredit the public statements made by specialists. Disseminating 'alternative facts,' they adopted intervention strategies that scholars have identified with the phenomenon of scientific denialism, centred on the production of artificial controversies that bypass the understandings reached by scientists, promote confusion in public debate and lead to paralysis in collective decision making (Kropf, 2022; Oreskes; Conway, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

In this article, my aim is to contribute to the historical and sociological understanding of how Covid-19 became an object of 'alternative facts' for representatives of the new far right active in Brazilian diplomacy during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> As I argue, in order to comprehend what lay behind this downplaying of the assertions produced by experts – such as the severity of the disease and the need for governments and societies to adopt preventive measures of social distancing – we must consider not only the threats of instability that Sars-CoV-2 initially represented to economic groups and established powers, but also their potential to disrupt existing forms of *social* imagination and organization.

Here I set out from the premise, which has demonstrated a considerable heuristic value in Science and Technology Studies, that 'science' and 'social order,' 'knowledge' and 'society' are co-produced rather than being deterministically and unilaterally conditioned by each other (Jasanoff, 2006). From a methodological perspective, this approach demands that, in focusing on the tensions and conflicts involved in the stabilization of scientific facts in public space, we do not lose sight of the fact that these disputes are located simultaneously on the cognitive level of representations of the natural world and on the sociopolitical level of beliefs and expectations in relation to the form in which societies should be structured and the power and authority distributed within them. For the purposes of the present analysis, I take the *social* as a heterogeneous set of actors and practices marked by the constant remaking of the bonds, connections and networks that shape it, involving human agents and also non-human ones, like microorganisms and the diseases caused by them. These, in addition to being the object of cultural

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<sup>2</sup> The expression 'alternative facts' became popular after Kellyanne Conway, counsellor to President Donald Trump at the time, used the term to refer euphemistically to the false allegations of the White House spokesman Sean Spicer on the number of people who had attended the president's inauguration in January 2017.

<sup>3</sup> This article is the result of my investigations as a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Research in the History of Science and Health at the Casa de Oswaldo Cruz/ Fiocruz (CNPq Award ADC-1A) and as a member of the research project "The present tense at Fiocruz: science and health in confronting the Covid-19 pandemic," coordinated by Simone P. Kropf and undertaken within the scope of the Casa de Oswaldo Cruz Research Excellence Program (Proep-COC-CNPq, 2021). I thank the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions for improving the text.

representations and a source of more or less structured collective responses in the form of public policies, form part of the diverse materials from which human societies have been historically constituted.<sup>4</sup>

Setting out initially from Science and Technology Studies, I examine the general outlines of what is called scientific denialism. I argue that the phenomenon, in terms of how it manifests in the contemporary world, is indissociable from the global rise of the new far right. Presenting themselves as ‘anti-system,’ these groups not only feed off the growing distrust of institutions that marks the present-day crisis of representative democracies, they also seek to deepen mistrust by questioning the truth value of different statements circulating in public space. In the next section, I seek to show, focusing on the Brazilian case, how the new reality established by the pandemic began to act cognitively as a destabilizing factor in the ‘anti-globalist’ imaginary of these actors. As scientific statements about the disease began to be articulated with declarations in favour of intranational and international cooperation and solidarity, they became a target of attacks from representatives of the far right aiming to weaken them. Ernesto Araújo, the first person to be appointed to the foreign affairs brief during the Bolsonaro government (2019-2022), discursively articulated some of the apprehensions of these circles regarding the political capacity of Sars-CoV-2 in radically redefining the *social* when he claimed that, accompanying the spread of the virus, the shadow of communism was looming threateningly.

### Scientific Denialism and the Anti-System Right

The year 2016 was an important landmark for discussions on the role of the ideas of fact and truth in the public sphere, especially in political debate. Episodes like the EU referendum in the United Kingdom, leading to Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump in the United States, which were accompanied by the mass reproduction of fake news on social networks, led press observers and analysts to conclude that the world was heading towards a ‘post-truth’ era in which shared belief in the existence of indisputable facts, above partisan disputes and the affirmation of political values, appeared to be dissolving. The phenomenon points to a stubborn refusal, if not incapacity, of considerable portions of the population to appreciate the factual content of different assertions circulating in public space.<sup>5</sup>

From a sociological perspective, the problem appears more complex, however, as scholars of science have indicated (Jasanoff; Simmet, 2017; Shapin, 2019). In contemporary societies, whose functioning depends on a variety of artifacts, practices and scientific knowledge, the so-called ‘crisis of truth’ does not seem to affect all claims issuing from the world of science indiscriminately, but is

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<sup>4</sup> A classic study exploring the concomitant processes of constructing social order and stabilizing scientific statements as facts was developed by Latour (1993). For a discussion of diseases and epidemics as objects of investigation in history and the social sciences, see Silveira and Nascimento (2018). A well-known analysis of the interconnections between transmissible diseases, collective responses in the sphere of public health and the reorganization of political power in Brazil can be found in Hochman (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Not by chance, in 2016 the Oxford English Dictionary chose the expression ‘post-truth’ as word of the year. According to its already famous – and problematic – definition, the term indicates “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential than personal beliefs and opinions in the formation of public opinion” (Post-Truth, 2016).

concentrated rather on those whose acceptance calls into question deep-rooted beliefs, values, interests and lifestyles (for example, anthropogenic climate change, the theory of evolution of the species, vaccine safety) (Eyal, 2019). Furthermore, as Oreskes and Conway (2010) observe in their exploration of the genesis of climate denialism, among other phenomena, the disbelief in scientific propositions is frequently fed by powerful political and economic actors with an interest in spreading doubt and stimulating fake controversies on questions around which consensus have already been established within the scientific community.

This and other forms of scientific denialism appear to have found fertile ground today, especially in a fragmenting neoliberal culture averse to forming minimal collective agreements capable of driving solutions to common problems, in the crisis in confidence faced by institutions, frequently questioned about their 'real interests' and agendas, and in the growing popular dissatisfaction with the institutionalization of political representation characteristic of liberal democracies.

The draining away of shared references from public debate – anchorage points capable of ensuring that people belong to a shared world that, in practice, support the idea of an 'external' and 'independent reality' – can be seen in the predisposition of many individuals and groups to view any statement circulating in the public sphere, even those that purport to communicate 'facts,' as just a 'matter of opinion.' This tendency has been exacerbated by the logic of social networks, leading to the formation of 'bubbles' – which, amid the cacophony of voices and information, constitute the framework through which subjects effectively navigate the virtual world. Formed by contacts who share the same opinions and values and maintained by algorithmic calculations that provide users of search engines and news feeds with content matching their interests and tastes, the bubble represents an insular communicative and cognitive dynamic, tending to reinforce group identity and beliefs and eliminate space for the divergent and contradictory (Roberts, 2017). This process, along with the increasing inequalities in income, socioeconomic situation and education among the different segments that constitute populations around the world, are seen to have contributed to the political, moral and epistemic fragmentation of societies (Rosenfeld, 2018). In the absence of shared frameworks of life, it comes as no surprise that 'alternative' visions of reality emerge and that their truth value, however absurd, is defended (Latour, 2020).

Communicational and cognitive isolation is also reinforced through the search for alternative sources of information amid a widespread distrust of traditional media and the deteriorating credibility of public actors and institutions, perceived to be entangled in unacknowledged private interests. As Shapin (2019) observed, at the root of the adherence of a portion of the population to denialists theses is, more than a lack of scientific knowledge, a dearth of forms of 'social knowledge' capable of allowing subjects to identify institutions that are truly worthy of credibility. Since science is associated with spaces and actors whose capacity for mediation (between the interests of society as a whole and the exercise of political power) is under suspicion, a problem constitutive of the crisis in representative democracy itself, it is unsurprising that the authority of experts –

that is, the people traditionally entrusted with translating scientific findings into practical recommendations – has been cast in doubt, particularly with regard to their privileged position in the shaping of collective decision-making compared to other actors (Eyal, 2019).

It is thus no coincidence that scientific denialism has ballooned to vivid proportions amid the political rise of the new far and extreme right in various countries. These movements have flourished in a cultural soup formed of fears and social dissatisfaction with the political elites that have marked the crisis in representative democracies and in a context of increasing inequalities and declining living conditions of the middle-class and poor wage-earners that followed the shocks produced by neoliberalism and globalization over the final decades of the twentieth century (Latour, 2020).

At the same time as they exploit widespread discontent with the political establishment to propel themselves into power, these extreme right movements, claiming to be ‘anti-system,’ have stimulated fractures and discord in public debate, especially by sowing distrust and conspiracy theories, in a continuous effort to construct themselves as relevant political actors in the contemporary world. By exhibiting a performance and rhetoric that contests the dominant political order and culture, associated with progressive political sectors, some scholars argue that these groups make up a ‘populist’ right, a categorization that demands some caution given the strong normative perspectives and value judgments associated with the term. As Laclau (2013) reminds us, the language of populism aims to dispute the relevant cleavages of the social world, insisting on the centrality of the divide between an usurping and deceiving ‘elite,’ on one hand, and the honest but subjugated and betrayed ‘people,’ on the other.<sup>6</sup> In the case of the new far right, there is no doubt, however, that as a political actor it defines itself as radical and insurgent, although more interested in destroying what exists rather than building a new society (Teitelbaum, 2020a). This helps explain the sometimes vulgar and violent language it employs, perceived as ‘authentic,’ ‘sincere’ and thus closer to the spontaneous reactions of ‘common folk’ than the ‘politically correct’ sanctioned by the established order. Given the anti-establishment radicalism with which it seeks to associate itself, labelling this right-wing movement as ‘extremist’ does not seem inappropriate.

From the perspective of these political groups, the existing order is manifested not only in national political elites but also in global forums and the decision-making bodies of multilateral agencies. Not coincidentally, they call for a return to the ‘local,’ relying on the supposed security offered by the closure of collectivities into national and ethnic provincial identities (Latour, 2020), even though they identify a diverse list of threats to these imagined communities, varying according to the country and region in which they operate.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> On the uses (and abuses) of the concept of populism, see Rosanvallon (2021). Analysing the Brazilian case, Lynch and Cassimiro (2022) propose a distinction between ‘left-wing populism’ and ‘right-wing populism,’ identifying Bolsonarism with the latter.

<sup>7</sup> In the United States and Europe, the question of immigrants plays a significant role in the construction of the ‘threats’ that act to reinforce the identity of these political groups, while in Brazil the ‘enemies’ evoked are generally internal: the cultural and political left, feminism, black activism and LGBTQIAPN+ activism. See Gallego (2018).



This explains the insistence of the new far right on the idea of the 'nation,' conceived as a natural space of popular sovereignty. However, this nationalism does not imply the defence or valorization of the state, whose former *raison d'être* as the guarantor of national interests through the exercise of political authority, is now viewed with mistrust. With traditional institutional mediations under suspicion, the political leader becomes the only legitimate actor capable of expressing the will of the 'people,' considered the true substratum of nationality. Naturally, the 'people' to whom these right-wing movements appeal in order to constitute themselves politically assumes particular features.

Although they present specificities related to the different national circumstances in which political groups operate, the efforts in the United States and Brazil to construct this 'people' reveal similarities.<sup>8</sup> Invested with the moral and religious values of western Judeo-Christian culture, imagined as a homogenous and cohesive whole, it is seen to be formed by subjects who cherish and safeguard the values of the Christian nuclear family, patriotism and individual freedom, the defence of which sometimes takes on an unconditional sense, averse to any wider institutional or societal commitments. As scholars have pointed out, this political construct, in terms of the agenda that the far right seeks to promote, reflects a singular combination of economic ultraliberalism and a conservatism of customs (Brown, 2019; Rocha, 2019).<sup>9</sup>

As part of the valorization of this understanding of the 'people,' the new far-right movements extol supposedly popular forms of knowledge. This cognitive dimension is no less relevant to understanding the formation of the political subject in question. In the view of an author who became one of the dominant intellectual representatives of these groups in Brazil, Olavo de Carvalho, the 'people,' considered to be intrinsically conservative, are held to possess a 'common sense' that, though silenced in the public debate, is frequently seen as superior to modern technico-scientific rationality, particularly with respect to its proximity to truths taken as timeless and transcendent, identified with metaphysics and religion, that are held to form an immemorial tradition. People can supposedly access these truths through an individual process of introspection based on intuition, which not only dispenses with the institutional mediation of academic learning but also opposes the latter, identified as responsible for dulling and controlling the mind (Silva, 2021).

Not without reason, this anti-intellectualism is a salient component of the far-right movements that have projected themselves politically both in the United States (Alexander, 2018) and in Brazil (Szwako; Souza, 2022). Intellectuals, academics and scientists, identified with global elites depicted as rootless and distant from the masses, have become the target of the same critical and questioning attitudes directed at the mainstream media and what these political circles define as the status quo (Rosenfeld, 2018). In Brazil, inspired by the writings of Olavo de Carvalho, the new right began to associate the university environment with a

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<sup>8</sup> The literature still lacks systematic analyses not only of the affinities but also the collaborations that were effectively established between leaders of the far right in Brazil and the United States, which ended up reinforcing the transnational dimension of the political movement of these groups.

<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of how the new far right has consolidated in Brazil, see Rocha (2019). On the varied social profiles and expectations that these groups mobilize in their attempt to gain political ascendancy, see Kalil (2018).

supposed hegemony of what they call ‘cultural Marxism,’ taken to act on culture in Gramscian fashion with the objective of perpetuating itself in political power – a question to which I return in the final section.

As indicated above, however, we can note that it is not truth as such that is discredited by the new far right, but the belief in accessing truth through established authorities. Thus, the inauguration of a new political regime capable of returning the ‘people’ to the place from which was usurped from them by the ‘elites’ necessarily involves the reestablishment of the current communicational and epistemic regime. According to this view, insofar as truth is restored to the assertions circulating in public debate – thanks above all to the alternative media and applications like WhatsApp, which facilitate direct and free communication between ordinary citizens – power will ultimately be restored to the people. Significant here is a statement made by Jair Bolsonaro, inspired by biblical verse, in a speech given after his 2018 election victory: “And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”<sup>10</sup>

In the eyes of the ‘anti-system’ right, reservations about the truths transmitted by traditional media outlets to justify the insistence with which they denounce the politically-interested nature of many of the claims presented as scientific in public debate. As I argue below, focusing on the discussions provoked by Sars-CoV-2, the adherence to ‘alternative facts’ by these movements should be examined in light of the simultaneously political and epistemic disputes that the new right has been waging in its process of self-construction. With the global outbreak of Sars-CoV-2, these political groups suddenly found themselves faced with a new and unknown viral reality, whose overwhelming logic seemed to run counter to their efforts to redefine the *social* on localist and anti-systemic bases.

### **The Emergence of Covid-19: Reimagining the *Social***

To understand why Covid-19 ended up representing yet another chapter in the contemporary history of scientific denialism, setting the new far right disinformation engine at full steam, we need to consider how the disease disrupted temporalities and the forms of socioeconomic organization that structure the present. Caused by an unknown respiratory virus that proved highly transmissible and lethal, Covid-19 became a threat to the response capacity of national health systems in the first months of 2020. Exploiting the uninterrupted flows of people and goods that organize contemporary social life, the virus spread rapidly around the planet. Given the many uncertainties and the lack of therapeutic treatments, measures long used in episodes of epidemic outbreaks, such as restricting free movement, began to be adopted by authorities in various parts of the world in the attempt to slow down the pace of the disease’s spread, leading many localities to suspend everyday face-to-face activities, with a major impact on the economy.

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<sup>10</sup> It does not seem fortuitous that cognitive questions relating to the dissemination of truth in public space – a truth that had supposedly been sequestered, distorted or even ‘suffocated’ by the elites – provide a motif for slogans and titles of books celebrated by the new far right, like *O imbecil coletivo* (The collective imbecile, 1996) and *O mínimo que você precisa saber para não ser um idiota* (The minimum you need to know to not be an idiot, 2013) by Olavo de Carvalho, and *A verdade sufocada* (The suffocated truth, 2006) by Carlos Brilhante Ustra.

Given the doubts and uncertainty surrounding the resumption of in-person activities – significantly called the ‘return to normal life’ – a tug-of-war to recapture forms of organizing time quickly became established between human societies and Sars-CoV-2. Possessing its own dynamic, linked to the virus’s transmission and mutation rates, Covid-19 instituted a new temporality in the structuring patterns of social experiences and interactions, the time of the “health emergency” (Hartog, 2021). Temporarily suspending the routine of contemporary capitalism (Boyer, 2020), the pandemic created spaces for questioning the sociotechnical and economic configurations of the present, which proved extremely precarious and vulnerable to the viral threat. The global race for testing materials, hospital supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE) eloquently exposed the dependency of most countries on a few global production centres, highlighting asymmetries and inequalities.

At the start of the pandemic, influential voices in the global new right, like Alexandr Dugin in Russia and Steve Bannon in the United States, were confident that the scale of the crisis would confirm the failure of the globalized logic of contemporary societies, underlining, by contrast, the importance of constructing a more robust and self-sufficient ‘local’ (Teitelbaum, 2020a). Contrary to these expectations, however, calls for renewed forms of intranational and international cooperation, awareness of the interdependence between individuals, peoples and nations, as well as critical views on the structural causes that had worsened the health emergency, also began to be connected to the affirmations circulating about the virus.

It did not take long, therefore, for disputes to arise over the propositions and assertions that could be legitimately linked to the sequence of statements initially made about the disease. Considering the bleak scenario that was being projected, in which non-pharmacological measures were the only technologies available at the time to combat the virus and minimize the risks of death and contagion, all the signs were that the way forward for societies would depend on the coordination at an unprecedented scale of political and health authorities around the world. This would be accompanied by new ways of distributing economic resources among the different social strata to enable compliance with sanitary isolation measures, which affected vulnerable and impoverished groups most of all. The stabilization of this type of response to the crisis, implying *remodellings of the imaginary and the existing forms of social solidarity*, met with resistance, however, clashing with interests, values and worldviews.

In the case of the Bolsonaro government, both domestic concerns (linked to the dispute over the configuration of Brazilian society) and international concerns (driven the new right’s onslaught against ‘globalism’), served as fuel for pandemic denialism, producing a series of statements that not only downplayed the severity of the disease but also sought to systematically associate the World Health Organization and China with the worsening of the crisis. On 31 March 2020, distorting the meaning of the declaration of WHO’s director, Tedros Adhanom, about the need to ensure the income of the world’s poor populations amid the slowdown in economic activity, Bolsonaro claimed that the organization was aligned with the Brazilian government in demonstrating a concern with maintaining employment (Martins, 2020). Tedros quickly clarified the meaning of



his declaration: “I call on countries to develop policies that provide economic protection to people unable to earn an income or work due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Solidarity” (Martins, 2020).

In April 2020, in an attempt to delegitimize WHO’s appeals for large-scale social cooperation to implement measures to contain the virus, such as tracking cases and imposing social distancing, Bolsonaro accused the organization of defending child masturbation and ‘gender ideology’ in social media messages, deleted shortly after (Ker, 2020). Subsequently, following in Trump’s footsteps, the Brazilian president began to raise suspicions about the real motives behind the organization’s health recommendations, threatening to withdraw the country from WHO were its “ideological bias” to be maintained (Garcia, 2020). Like the US government, Bolsonaro’s administration also began to heap insults on China, beginning with a Twitter post by the president’s son, Eduardo Bolsonaro, then a federal deputy, who blamed Beijing for the huge scale of the pandemic, suggesting that the autocratic attempt to control information on events during the initial outbreak of the disease in Wuhan had prevented the world from learning about the facts more quickly (Fellet, 2020).

Measures restricting the circulation of people became the target of systematic attacks from Bolsonaro after various state governments in Brazil resolved to adopt them in the second half of March 2020. The former president began to invest in constructing a disjunctive logic that would become a constant in his way of framing the pandemic: either maintain general restrictions on the circulation of people, which would affect the country’s economic performance, or focus on elderly people as the population to be isolated, promoting the idea of herd immunity and preserving jobs and income. This way of constructing alternative in the midst of the health crisis sought to appeal in particular to social groups whose monthly budget, already fairly limited, was being directly affected by the suspension of in-person activities, including informal workers (Brazil, 2020). However, the dilemma created by the former president omitted the possibility of implementing robust social policies capable of enabling the adoption of physical distancing by poorer sections of the population, exempting them, at least temporarily, from the need to confront the laws of the market by themselves. But this alternative, which would have demanded a *reconfiguration of forms of solidarity*, was the antithesis of the *social* envisioned by Bolsonarism.

In this case, we need to consider how the power of agency of Sars-CoV-2 came to pose a challenge to the ultraliberal premises of Bolsonaro’s ‘Superminister’ of the Economy, Paulo Guedes. As epidemiological announcements about the measures needed to contain the virus became more or less rigidly linked to the initial statements about the disease, so the idea that a market left to its own devices could satisfactorily address society’s problems became weakened.

Not only did ideas important to the composition of the Bolsonaro government appear to be weakened by the fight against the virus, but even Bolsonarism itself as a political and anthropological experiment. The pandemic ran counter to the tendency of the new far right in Brazil to promote, as Lessa (2020, p. 57) observes, the “normative disconnection of the state and society,” diluting the mechanisms of solidarity enshrined by the 1988 Constitution and clearing the way for the manifestation of “archaic moments of Brazilian sociability” (Lessa, 2020, p.

57). That is, the health demands imposed by the virus became a source of destabilization for the Bolsonarist perspective of destatizing Brazilian society in the sense of returning it to a 'pre-political' order constituted by the free but unequal play of forces characteristic of its history (Lessa, 2020, p. 57).

Their political horizon of Bolsonarism – which, in practice, produced, among other effects, the advance of wildcat mining on indigenous lands, the expansion of access to guns by private individuals, the relaxation of environmental and labour protection laws – help us understand why issues like social distancing, the use of face masks and vaccination were systematically presented by the government in terms of individual freedom, as problems to be resolved privately. In fact, the statements that sought to make them compulsory measures, socially binding, conceiving them as *collective strategies* in the context of public norms, were systematically attacked insofar as they directly contradicted the efforts of Bolsonarism – typical of the new far right – to discredit the possibility of collective imaginaries about social life, enshrining instead privatism, deregulation and the defence of individual freedom, conceived from the logic of the market. As indicated previously, this impetus is consistent with the systematic distrust of these groups – which serves as the basis for their construction as political subjects – in relation to the established political-institutional order and the prospect of instauration of minimal collective agreements aimed at regulating social relations.

### **Red Alert: Brazilian Diplomacy against Globalism**

The implications – in terms of configurations to be assumed by the *social* – of what would be a properly scientific response to the Covid-19 pandemic allow us to better qualify the denialism expressed by the Bolsonaro government, along with its attacks on multilateralism in the international setting. This stance fed on a national and global context in which trust in scientists and specialists had already been shaken. Rather than turning against science as a whole, however, the rejection of scientific facts by these actors was directed at the connections linking the most basic statements about the disease and the virus to the declarations – inevitably weaker – on the practical actions and political decisions needed to contain its spread.

WHO's health guidelines, implying an unprecedented strengthening of social bonds, collided with the efforts of the new far right movements to provoke social disaggregation. China, for its part, with its relative success in controlling the internal dissemination of the diseases in a short space of time, embodied, for this very reason, old fears about the reach of the power of state over populations. According to various analysts, the civic spirit of the Asian country, revealing the capacity of individuals to act concertedly as a single body, proved decisive in confronting the health emergency (Byung-Chul, 2020). For the new right, though, the pandemic confirmed China's vocation for a type of social organization to be avoided at all costs: a disposition towards coordination and cooperation between different sectors of society through the centralizing action of the state, combined with a collectivist culture seen to curb freedoms. In the context of the pandemic, Chinese discipline and the calls for international solidarity made by WHO were

immediately understood as convergent forces, acting on behalf of so-called globalism. In the Bolsonaro government, the foreign minister Ernesto Araújo voiced these concerns, which shape the imaginary of the new right, when he stated that the pandemic was clearing the way for the ‘communavirus.’

Araújo’s trajectory illuminates aspects of the problem analysed here. Previously a middle-ranking member of Itamaraty, the Brazilian Foreign Office, his appointment by Bolsonaro to the post of foreign minister confounded the expectations of Brazilian diplomats. Although he had almost 30 years experience in the career, his position as head of the Department for the United States and Canada was not enough to guarantee his legitimacy as head of the ministry, representing a break with established hierarchies (Paranguassu, 2018). Still, Araújo proved to have the right connections at the right time. With the help of Filipe Martins, advisor to the Presidency on international affairs, Araújo had drawn close in 2018 to Eduardo Bolsonaro, the president’s son, and Olavo de Carvalho, guru of the new far right in Brazil.<sup>11</sup>

The article “Trump and the West,” published by Araújo in 2017 in Itamaraty’s journal *Cadernos de Política Exterior*, was a decisive factor in his entry into these political circles. In the text, the diplomat outlines a metaphysical interpretation of the rise of the new right to power in different parts of the world. In Araújo’s view, a huge effort was underway, materialized in the political figure of Donald Trump, then recently elected president of the United States, to question and contain the ‘technocratic liberalism’ and ‘political correctness’ that had supposedly become hegemonic in the cultural and ideological panorama of the present (Araújo, 2017, p. 331). Despised by the “hyperintellectualized and cosmopolitan elite,” imbued with a relativist postmodern culture, Trump nonetheless represented the endeavour to revive the traditions and foundational historical experiences of western nations, centred on the simultaneous reverence for individual freedom, the family and the Christian god (Araújo, 2017, p. 326).

The international situation is read by Araújo as a clash between moral forces in the style of the grammar used in the cultural wars of the new right: on one hand, the multiculturalist attempt to deny national identity in the name of a false culture of tolerance, dissolving the distinctive characteristics of each people; on the other, the endeavour of nations to return to their origins and their symbolic past. For Araújo, Trump’s nationalism did not represent isolationism but a willingness to engage in international affairs based on the recognition of each country’s distinct identity. In this way, he represented, according to the former foreign minister, a salutary response to the risk of diluting nations into “a global shapeless mass” (Araújo, 2017, p. 332).

Araújo’s administration soon came under criticism from specialists and the press. Breaking with Brazilian diplomacy’s traditions of pragmatism and multilateralism, the minister implemented an ‘ideological’ foreign policy that was subservient in its automatic alignment with the United States.<sup>12</sup> Already in his inauguration speech, in 2019, Araújo, as well as uttering a prayer to the Virgin

<sup>11</sup> His services in Washington between 2010 and 2014, when he developed close ties with Nestor Forster, minister-counsellor of the Brazilian embassy, considered by his peers as an ultraconservative Catholic, had also helped draw Araújo closer to these extremist groups (Dal Piva; Evelin, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of the kind of rupture with foreign policy advocated by Bolsonaroism, see Spektor (2019).

Mary in the Tupi language, had exhorted diplomats to concern themselves less with reading *Foreign Affairs* – a well-known magazine reporting on the diplomatic world – and more on re-establishing ties with the Brazilian ‘people’ (Araújo, 2019). Although it may have appeared anecdotal to commentators at the time, it was an insurgent performance befitting of a diplomatic representative of the new far and extreme right.

The criticism failed to perceive that the former foreign minister sought to be consistent with the stance of these political groups by insisting on discussing values in a world of policy decisions usually presented as exclusively technical or informed by pragmatism. Following this new *modus operandi*, Araújo showed himself ready from the outset to openly affirm a specific set of doctrines, seeking to give expression to what he claimed to be the genuine feelings of dissatisfaction of the ‘people’ – in the particular sense that, as we have seen, the new far right give to this term – with the bureaucratized routines of diplomacy and the insulation of the traditional political elites from the values of ‘nationality.’

Araújo’s uncompromising stance in relation to the world of values provoked ironic remarks from experienced politicians like Aloysio Nunes Ferreira, former senator and Brazilian foreign minister during the presidency of Michel Temer. Taking inspiration from Machiavelli, Nunes Ferreira observed that, sooner or later, the “effective truth of things” would eventually force the then foreign minister to accept the need for compromise and concessions. There is no doubt that Aloysio Nunes’s comment reflects a maxim of political wisdom capable of guiding our understanding of the shockwaves experienced by the forces making up the Bolsonaro government in the diplomatic arena, especially in its tense relations with China, a central actor for Brazilian trade and agribusiness exports (Dieguez, 2019). However, this realism overlooks the fact that the intellectual representatives of the new far right vehemently reject precisely such cynical and disenchanting readings of social and historical reality, appealing instead to metanarratives in the attempt to imbue history with transcendent meaning and purpose. In short, their aim is to rebel against the disenchanting world represented by institutionalized beliefs and practices.<sup>13</sup>

Araújo’s refusal to bend to the practical imperatives of the international setting in the name of a much-vaunted defence of the sovereignty of the values of the ‘Brazilian people’ reached its paroxysm with the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the view consolidated in the public debate, his administration, closely aligned in particular with Trump’s United States and its displays of hostility towards China and WHO, compromised a series of channels for the international negotiation of strategic resources for confronting the disease. In March 2020, Araújo, via an official press release from Itamaraty, censured the Chinese ambassador in Brazil for sharing criticisms of the Bolsonaro family on Twitter after the Chinese diplomat had responded strongly to Eduardo Bolsonaro’s attempts to blame the Asian country for the scale of the global health crisis. At the initiative of the foreign minister, Brazil supported the United States’ proposal to suppress any mention of the decisive role played by WHO in combatting Sars-CoV-2 in United Nations documentation.

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<sup>13</sup> In his opening address to the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI) set up in April 2021 to investigate the federal government’s conduct in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, Ernesto Araújo sought precisely to attack the dichotomies of ‘value/interest’ and ‘ideology/pragmatism’ in the more traditional readings of how foreign policy is conducted (CPI [...], 2021).



Araújo also echoed the criticism of the management of the crisis by the multilateral agency, expressing resistance to Brazil's participation in the Covax Facility, a global alliance led by WHO for the development, production and distribution of vaccines among poor countries.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, the foreign minister engaged in negotiations with the Indian government for the release of inputs for producing chloroquine in Brazil. In December 2020, echoing Bolsonaro's disdain for the severity of the health crisis, Araújo described much of the response to the disease as a "biopolitical hysteria" that had been used "as a mechanism of control" (Araújo, 2020b). In March 2021, amid pressure from Congress and suspicions circulating in the national press that Brazilian diplomacy's hostility to China had delayed its shipment of supplies for the production of vaccines in Brazil, Araújo resigned the command of Itamaraty.

Araújo's adherence to 'alternative facts' concerning the Covid-19 pandemic shows us how the positions of the far right were threatened by the reality of the virus itself, an agent indifferent to the political borders that highlighted the precariousness of isolated actions by countries in a globalized and hyperconnected world. As the interdependence of nations in the world context and of individuals and groups within national societies became increasingly apparent with the crisis, so the statements about the pandemic began to be dismissed by Araújo, who voiced in particular the worries of the new right about the possible strengthening of so-called globalism.

The 'globalism' against which these groups claim to fight had left many analysts perplexed (Gragnani, 2019; Marchao 2019). In its conceptual impression and lack of clear empirical references, the expression frequently seems to function as an empty signifier (Laclau, 2013) capable of channelling, in the digital era, diffuse feelings of discomfort with the effects of globalization, articulating them in favour of a political identity. It is not a critique of economic globalization – which would entail a revision of the free market theses of which the intellectuals of the new far right call themselves advocates (Chaloub; Perlatto, 2015; Silva, 2021) – but the fear that the process of market integration may be captured by international agents supposedly interested in establishing a supranational government and culture. The conspiracy-like tones that anti-globalist discourse sometimes assumes, implying that there is some kind of secret orchestration of actors in the international arena, nonetheless resonate with a broader mistrust of institutions and the ruling classes – a feeling that the far right has fed and fed on simultaneously.

In texts articulating the idea of 'globalism,' like those of Carvalho (2009) and Martins (2021), we can glimpse the anguish in the face of a technocratic dystopia, an administration of the planet carried out by anonymous bureaucrats, far out of reach of common folk, dismissive of their decision-making power and, at the same time, possessing the technical and scientific capacity to control habits and behaviours, influencing society and culture. In this sense, planetary-level political-administrative centralization is seen to go hand-in-hand with a type of cultural homogenization guided by covert objectives, seeking to erode the 'genuine' values of western nations. For the Brazilian far and extreme right, this is 'cultural Marxism,' a category also without any precise meaning but which evokes the same sense of a

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<sup>14</sup> On Araújo's administrative response to the pandemic, see CPI [...] (2021).



diverse set of agendas associated with politically progressive sectors (gender equality, the rights of the LGBTQIAPN+ population, combating anthropogenic global warming): an attempt to act in the area of culture and institutions in order to clear the way for an eventual seizure of political power at a global scale.

Despite the conceptual imprecisions highlighted by analysts, the idea of ‘anti-globalism’ connects to the crisis in political representation, especially insofar as it encapsulates the diffuse fear of a faceless transnational global power – a “totalitarian exercise without a totalizing entity,” in the words of Araújo (2020a) – against which it is necessary to fight in the name of the capacity of nations to shape their own destiny, exercising power by themselves according to their ‘traditions.’

This seems to have been the meaning of the warning issued by the former foreign minister about the risks of a ‘communavirus,’ that is, the possibility that the pandemic could create the space for the “virus of communism” by fuelling a kind of compulsory international solidarity, averse to individual freedoms and national sovereignty, tending, in Araújo’s words, to transform the human being “into a automaton devoid of any spiritual dimension and easily controllable” (Araújo, 2020a). This idea – presented, as befits a representative of the ‘anti-system’ far right, on the personal blog of Bolsonaro’s foreign minister, *Metapolítica 17 – Contra o Globalismo* (Metapolitics 17 – Against Globalism) – had a wide impact in the press, greeted with consternation and at the same time derision, read as yet another attack on China and WHO.<sup>15</sup>

In the text, however, Araújo does not attribute to any of these agents in particular the capture of the Covid-19 response by globalism, although he does emphasize “the value that WHO has at this moment for the cause of denationalization” (Araújo, 2020a). The leading role played by the multilateral agency appeared to signal, in his view, the risk of a gradual transfer of national powers to a global entity under the pretext that centralized responses would be more effective than the actions taken by individual countries. Even so, in his text, WHO appears more as an entity to be instrumentalized than the agent driving forward globalism (Araújo, 2020a).

In reality, in the absence of robust evidence for the thesis that the health emergency was preparing the ground for the implantation of a world government, “without face or flag” (Araújo, 2020a), contrary to individual freedoms, Araújo ended up handpicking in a highly convenient way his interlocutor, the author whose work definitively proved – he asserted – the articulation of international cooperation efforts in favour of globalism. This author is Slavoj Žižek, the Slovenian philosopher who became renowned in the digital world after he began to essay diagnoses of the ills of contemporary society through analyses of pop culture, based on a mixture of Marxist theory and psychoanalysis. In his book *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (published in Brazil by Editora Boitempo as *Covid-19 e a reinvenção do comunismo*), Žižek seeks to extract political and existential lessons from the pandemic, an exercise that was fairly common among intellectuals and thinkers of different ideological hues around the world during the first months of the health crisis – which instilled the acute sense that the world we had known was in a state of suspension.

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<sup>15</sup> The term ‘metapolitics’ is used to synthesize the strategies of the new far and extreme right movements of acting through culture, education and the media, a paradoxically Gramscian understanding of political practice (Teitelbaum, 2019).

The argument that new bonds of cooperation would eventually emerge in response to the health emergency, present in the philosopher's book, seemed to have provided sufficient proof to Araújo that the statements about the virus were being captured by the "globalist project," sufficing to note the influence enjoyed by the Slovenian writer on "faculties and 'progressive' intellectual circles around the world" (Araújo, 2020a). The choice of a politically radical interlocutor provided the diplomat with the ideal elements to substantiate the thesis of the new far right about the capture of statements on the pandemic by political interests. For the former foreign minister, the strength of Žižek's argument lay in his call for 'pragmatism,' since international cooperation – the trial run for the implementation of a global government – was being presented as the only viable option for controlling the disease (Araújo, 2020a). Much more dangerous than Sars-CoV-2, the virus of communism thus threatened to spread around the world with renewed force.

Although the target of ridicule, the texts produced by Ernesto Araújo, as well as by other intellectual representatives of the 'anti-system' right, provide important clues to understanding how these actors, by articulating discourses on science, health and society in the contemporary world, have been constructing themselves as relevant political subjects in the present. In this sense, their ideas deserve to be examined and comprehended.

### **Final Considerations**

It is no coincidence that the so-called 'post-truth' era has emerged concurrently with the rise of new far right movements to power in various parts of the world. Drinking from the waters of popular dissatisfaction with technical, scientific and political elites at a moment when neoliberal globalization, exacerbating inequalities, is showing signs of exhaustion, far right groups seek to promote not just a new political regime, but also a new communicational and epistemic order, enabling them to both connect power more organically with the demands of those they understand as the 'people' and include, in the list of legitimately accepted forms of knowledge, their 'common sense' truths, seen to have been long silenced in public debate. This cognitive dimension is central to understanding how this new political actor has taken shape.

The Covid-19 pandemic erupted in this delicate political and cognitive scenario of questioning the technical and political authorities responsible for operating the political pact of liberal democracies amid the proliferation of direct and interactive means of communication, functioning beyond the traditional media and taken by the new far right as ideal channels for expression of suppressed popular opinions and desires. Given the instability it generated in the sociotechnical configurations of the present, it is no surprise that even the reality of Covid-19 itself has come under fierce dispute. By highlighting the shared global space in which people live, the disease threatened to sweep away the 'anti-globalist' appeals of these groups. As I have argued, the resistance of figures from the Bolsonaro government, like the former minister Ernesto Araújo, to scientific statements about the disease should be comprehended in light of these disputes, which revolved around the way in which the *social* is ordered.

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