The ambiguous other.
Engaging with far right and other uncomfortable subjectivities

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Abstract:

This article explores anthropological hesitation in engaging with "abject" or otherwise "uncomfortable" subjectivities, identifying some of the main concerns and challenges behind it. In doing so, the discussion focuses on far-right subjectivities and on the reasons behind the relative lack of ethnographic studies thereof. Among other things, it is argued that the far-right other does not fit current anthropological orthodoxy in terms of ethnographic approach and therefore represents a kind of ambiguous alterity that poses ethical and methodological challenges for anthropologists. The discussion then brings to light some of the tensions and dilemmas inherent in anthropological approaches to uncomfortable alterities. The article concludes by highlighting what may be at stake for anthropology when excluding certain subjects of research, suggesting instead that their study offers opportunities to expand anthropological horizons of knowledge production, increasing the discipline's relevance for understanding and analysing complex and troubling contemporary social phenomena.

Keywords: Ethnography; Uncomfortable alterities; The far right; Politics; Brazil

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El otro ambiguo.
Abordando la extrema derecha y otras alteridades incómodas desde la antropología.

Resumen:

Este artículo explora la vacilación antropológica a la hora de abordar subjetividades "abyectas" o "incómodas", identificando algunas de las principales preocupaciones y desafíos que se esconden detrás de ella. Al hacerlo, la discusión se centra en las subjetividades de extrema derecha y en las razones que se esconden detrás de la relativa falta de estudios etnográficos al respecto. Entre otras cosas, se sostiene que el otro de extrema derecha no encaja en la ortodoxia antropológica actual en términos de enfoque etnográfico y, por lo tanto, representa una especie de alteridad ambigua que plantea desafíos éticos y metodológicos para los antropólogos. Luego, la discusión saca a la luz algunas de las tensiones y dilemas inherentes a los enfoques antropológicos de las alteridades incómodas. El artículo concluye destacando lo que puede estar en juego para la antropología al excluir ciertos sujetos de investigación, sugiriendo en cambio que su estudio ofrece oportunidades para expandir los horizontes antropológicos de producción de conocimiento, aumentando la relevancia de la disciplina para comprender y analizar fenómenos sociales contemporáneos complejos y problemáticos.
Palabras claves: Etnografia; Alteridades incómodas; Extrema derecha; Política; Brasil

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Introduction

What are we grappling with when we speak of uncomfortable alterities? Are we referring to those anecdotes of awkward situations ethnographies are rife with? Like those serendipitous moments when a gaffe or blunder the ethnographer embarrassingly commits offers an unexpected and oftentimes eye-opening discovery about the people one studies? Are we, in other words, alluding to discomfort, to some degree amusing and productive, that may result from living close to or with the Other? Hardly so. Discussion of uncomfortable alterities in recent anthropological writing points to a very different kind of discomfort, one that is often crippling, proscriptive, and ultimately rules out the very ethnographic undertaking.

Alterities produced by far-right, neo-Nazi, and fascist sympathizers, jihadists, femicide perpetrators, child molesters, and other subjects that personify, for most, abject moralities and violent socialities, sit uncomfortably with ideas of conviviality and acceptance in difference, as well as with ethnographic principles of proximity, contextualisation, and understanding of both individual trajectories and of broader structural, conjunctural, and historical circumstances. Such abject or negative subjectivities rarely become the focus of ethnographic research. From one perspective, it would seem that the least moral ground the anthropologist shares with an Other, the least likely it is for research to ever take place.

While it is understandable that this is so—after all, why would one choose to conduct fieldwork with people they do not like or, worse even, cannot stand?—I want in this article to delve into the inclination to shun specific kinds of subjectivities and to tease out some of the most salient reasons anthropologists hesitate to study (their) uncomfortable others, discussing what may be at stake in failing to engage with abject alterities. The discussion will dwell on far-right subjectivities and the challenges they may bring to anthropologists as subject of research. In doing so, I wish to sketch out what is commonly seen as a problem and suggest that although fieldwork with 'uncomfortable alterities' may be harsh and thorny, overcoming reluctance and actively engaging with such alterities in anthropological research is an essential way forward.

The article is comprised of three main sections. In the first, I identify some of the key issues that emerge in anthropological approaches to uncomfortable alterities and discuss the importance of returning to fieldwork and move beyond current impediments. In the second section, I specifically explore the relative lack of ethnographic studies of the far right and point to some of the reasons this may be so. In the third section, I show how the far-right other does not fit current anthropological orthodoxy in terms of ethnographic approach and therefore represents a kind of ambiguous alterity that is particularly hard to grapple with, posing ethical and methodological challenges for ethnographers. By drawing on a seminal ethnographic example of Bolsonarismo, I will reflect on some of the tensions and dilemmas inherent in anthropological approaches to uncomfortable alterities. I will conclude with some reflections on the value of overcoming such impediments for the expansion of the horizons of our disciplinary knowledge production.

In line with the proposition made by this Special Issue's organizers, I suggest that instead of halting field research, discomfort can be a productive starting point for opening up the field of phenomena and issues anthropologists study, offering new opportunities for understanding the social, political, and ethical other

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and hence enrich the potential of anthropology to offer valuable insights into contemporary society and pressing complex issues. In this sense, this article also contributes to ongoing debates on broadening the field of anthropological research to include subjectivities commonly neglected (see, e.g., the Special Issue organised by Lene Faust & Simone Pfeifer, 2021).

Anthropology and the study of uncomfortable alterities

Discussion of alterity and identity, subjectivity, othering, the self and the beyond-self or other-than-self, is so vast and constitutive of anthropological theory that it would be futile to even attempt a brief sketch here as a way of introducing the theme of 'alterity' and, consequently, that of 'uncomfortable alterity'. It probably suffices to note that both field research, the discipline's emblematic pursuit, and ethnographic writing are profoundly shaped by the relation between the anthropological self and the other it studies. Such relations are often informed by ideas of mutual constitution, fluidity, and transformation, as well as translation and interpretation, that ultimately enlighten our own understanding of ourselves, in the field and beyond. 'Without the 'other' – be it your mother, spouse, child, neighbour, colleague, disciplinary forbear, or indeed Cuban *santero*, Minhoto motorcyclist, Achuar shaman or Brazilian novelist – the world remains opaque, as does your own sense of self', as Stephan Palmié (2022: 82) eclectically put it. Whatever the situated (conjunctural and ephemeral) nature of a given relation with alterity is, it is commonly understood that anthropology is first and foremost about constructing, comprehending, documenting, and narrating the nitty-gritty of that experience.

Yet not all alterities are created equal, as it were, with some sparking far less interest in being explored and comprehended. Uncomfortable alterities, that is, alterities that do not sit comfortably with anthropological orthodoxy with regards to who and what can be a subject worth researching (I will return to this point shortly), do not only attract little ethnographic attention but even when they do, they are often met with discomfort when presented among peers. Marco Julián Martínez-Moreno, for example, shared in a recent text (Martínez-Moreno 2022) his reflexive scrutiny about his relationships with his interlocutors in the field, the majority accused of intrafamily violence, and the unease many of his colleagues expressed when he was presenting his research.

Agnieszka Pasieka similarly relates an outburst of questions, addressed by her academic colleagues, about what they generally perceived as her daring field research with far-right citizens. In these questions, Pasieka's colleagues emphasized the presumed tension, or incompatibility, between her (and, by extension, a broader anthropological 'us') and 'them', the 'deplorable' others (2019: 3). Pasieka observes how the insistence of referring to her interlocutors as 'them' in those questions (e.g., 'How did you talk to *them*?') 'conveys an absolute, repulsive otherness which no one would purportedly wish to engage with' (ibid). The suggestion often was, says Pasieka, that getting close and talking to 'them' would be 'so repugnant and condemnable that [it] would simply preclude any fieldwork encounter' (ibid).

My own experience echoes Pasieka's and Martínez-Moreno's reflections. In my ongoing research project, I set out to study the context of the 2022 presidential election in Brazil, and specifically explore the contestations of the electoral result by a segment of the population. To do so, I conducted field research among Bolsonaro supporters who considered Lula's victory to have been fraudulent and, therefore, illegitimate. I was based in the city of Rio de Janeiro, from January to November 2023, but I also spoke with people from across the state and the country. When I was initiating my fieldwork, I was scrambling for interlocutors. My previous long-term field research was conducted among quilombolas in Amazonian Maranhão (Hatzikidi 2018, 2021), a far cry from urban Rio de Janeiro and the research project I was embarking on. I reached out to friends and colleagues in Rio hoping they could introduce me to someone they knew and who would be willing to talk to me about how they had experienced recent political events. The reaction I most commonly encountered among my peers was one of surprise and slight discomfort, often followed by a friendly nudge in reconsidering my research topic.

'I cut ties with any Bolsonarista I knew', was a recurrent confession, a painful decision often taken after many conflictive Sunday family gatherings or militant social media activity that just couldn't be tolerated or ignored anymore. Others had more frontal reactions. 'Why the hell would you want to talk to these people? No one can talk to them, they are from another planet', a colleague, upset that this, among a million other, was my research topic told me. Although I understood and empathised with those who were dealing with delicate affective relations, often striving to maintain a fragile communication with loved ones by avoiding any mention of politics, I was also baffled. Yes, this was an informal *botequim* chat, but wouldn't one expect a different, less essentialist, take from an anthropologist? What was so obnoxious about the idea of field research with 'the most extreme' of Bolsonaristas? Why was the very possibility of meaningful interaction with 'them' precluded? Wasn't my colleague's irritation at least partly indicating that such research shouldn't be taking place at all? And while one should be able to feel, at a personal level, any way they like about others and political subjectivities they object to, when did such intransigence become an acceptable professional/ disciplinary stance?

Such reactions from peers should come as a surprise considering anthropology's historical construction as a discipline that sets to study the other; any other. Or is it only a specific kind of other? My argument in this article is that our discipline's commitment, since at least the 1970s, to the model of anthropologist-citizen, who embraces[1] the cause(s) and ideas of the people they study and publicly defends them, not only excludes many from becoming the subject of anthropological research but also compromises, questions, and ultimately rebukes those anthropologists who study such abject others. More than thinking about the ethical and methodological challenges 'highly contested research fields' (Faust & Pfeifer 2021) present (I will return to these later), I am here concerned with processes of othering that ultimately render fieldwork unattainable and limit the possibilities for research with specific alterities. My aim here then is to explore the moral imperatives that underpin a broad anthropological consensus on what can constitute a worthy research subject in the first place and argue in favour of widening the spectrum of anthropological research to include 'the ambiguities and affordances that characterize *all* social life and praxis' (Goodale 2021: 198; italics in the original).

As Susan Harding had suggested in her seminal article on the 'repugnant cultural other', it appears that 'antiorientalizing tools of cultural criticism are better suited for some 'others'' (Harding 1991: 375) and not for those anthropologists often find uncomfortable to be around. Some scholars have suggested that a reason this may be so is that not all others are taken equally seriously. And since they cannot be taken seriously, they 'can only be denounced' (Dullo 2016: 138). While I broadly agree with this argument, in the case of far-right alterities the relative lack of anthropological studies does not primarily spring from anthropologists *not* taking them seriously, but, on the contrary, from taking them *too* seriously and perceive them as a political, social, and even existential threat that does not deserve ethnographic attention.

Hence, the way many anthropologists have found to engage with such uncomfortable alterities is to 'speak from the wound': to leave ethnographic analysis aside and engage in an impassioned, accusatory, and usually one-sided and therefore distantiated, interpretation of the danger the other presents. With noteworthy exceptions (see, e.g., Kalil 2018; Cesarino 2020; Dullo 2021 and the works by Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco 2020, 2021; I discuss below), most anthropologists enter the political debate on Bolsonarismo as stakeholders, missing entirely the chance to elucidate the other's point of view and reducing their interventions to advocacy and denunciation. They often speak of the other without getting anywhere near them, reflecting only on impressions built upon fragments of a collapsed conviviality. Beautiful and poignant diatribes are then more accurately read as opinion essays with little empirical relevance rather than anthropological writing offering grounded insights. While the political can be personal, and it is justified to express shock and sorrow over the

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1   Benjamin Teitelbaum (2019) recently turned this professional code of ethics on its head making the case for an 'immoral anthropology', which maintains the 'scholar-informant solidarity' even when there is a major conflict between their ideas. I am here suggesting a break away from either sides of this paradigm.

rise of a complex and prickly social and political phenomenon that to many appeared 'meteoric' (see Hatzikidi 2022), anthropological analysis loses in depth and applicability when it is detached from careful ethnographic research conducted with the very subjects we wish to talk about.

While the phenomenon commonly described as Bolsonarismo has received remarkable attention from social scientists, including anthropologists, many analyses are so distant from the realities and the people they purport to unpack that they fail to see them in their own terms, primarily inscribing, for example, negative affective relationships –like resentment or fear– where an overwhelmingly positive spirit –'hope for a better future', 'love for the country', in their own words– motivated people to rally support for an unlikely presidential candidate.[2] And if by now it is commonplace to problematise the alleged uniformity of Bolsonaristas and concede that they too are a complex and diverse group like any other, their composition is still not readily qualified as equally dynamic as that of other political groups, with a tendency to see in 'them' a bounded alterity, fanatically upholding a political project thriving on hate and destruction. Partly due to this perspective, much academic writing post-2018 on the topic reads like a painfully personal testimony of 'what happened' and 'how it was experienced'; an account to be shared with the world of the sheer perplexity of living in the aftermath of a social earthquake that left many wondering how it happened in the first place and how peace (or, perhaps simply, the 'liberal settlement'—see Mazzarella 2019: 48) can be restored, without however being able to move in any significant way away from the personal, or the selectively collective, experience and reach out to the uncomfortable other.

My proposition is that a more productive way to approach such phenomena is to leave the shelter of our ruminations from afar and turn to the uncomfortable other via ethnography: get close to 'them', get to know 'them', and try to see things from 'their' own perspective. To return to Harding, this time from a recent essay, '[anthropologists] need to keep at bay the liberal desire to restore 'order' and a sense of normalcy that specifically engenders an 'imperial disregard' for [democracy's] right-wing-by-products' (Harding 2021: 4). We would then be better positioned to speak about these people's lifeworlds, their claims, their grievances, and, as anthropologist citizens, propose different forms of, to put it in Laclauian terms, satisfying their demands, forms that would come from a different position in the left-right spectrum.

Why are there not enough anthropological studies of the far-right?

As studies of different uncomfortable alterities, such as neo-nationalist and right-wing extremist others, have sprouted in the last decade or so (see, e.g., Gingrich & Banks 2006, Shoshan 2016, Bangstad *et al.* 2017; Loperfido 2021, Saglam 2021), anthropologists have enquired into the apparent scarcity of ethnographies on the unpleasant other. Nitzan Shoshan (2015) takes a closer look at the arguments usually put forward as explanations and refutes them one by one. Specifically, he demonstrates that the relevant scarcity cannot be exclusively conceived of as the result of concerns about anthropologists' safety and physical integrity as anthropologists put themselves into dangerous or otherwise risky situations all too frequently. Neither can it be considered a result of methodological concerns, since suspicion and mistrust are not exclusive to 'uncomfortable' interlocutors, nor is gaining access and trust an insurmountable problem in other contexts. Also, even for those who consider such political phenomena to be too marginal, aberrant, or socially insignificant (a decade ago) to worth an in-depth study, Shoshan reminds us that such rationale doesn't seem to deter anthropologists working on different kinds of aberrant or unusual topics. What then, he asks, can explain the scarcity of said ethnographies?

Is it the fear of 'contamination' that comes from close proximity, as Gingrich and Banks suggest when they speak of 'moral hygiene' (Gingrich & Banks 2006: 7) in explaining why anthropologists do not wish to conduct

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2   For a discussion of the populist promise's entanglements of hope and future aspirations, see Chamorro (2023).

fieldwork with neo-nationalists? Or has it to do with anthropology's preference for emic concepts and the fact that virtually no-one identifies as a right-wing extremist or far-right enthusiast?

Shoshan's answer points at a different direction, namely at restrictions and expectations, both from inside the discipline as well as from outside. 'As anthropologists', he explains, 'if our interest in such topics [politics proper; unpleasant or repugnant faces of human history] is tolerated at all, we are usually expected to apply our ethnographic methods to those who are perceived –and whom we represent as– victims, as inhabitants of the position of the oppressed, the persecuted, or the subaltern' (Shoshan 2015: 155; *my translation*). This insight directly dialogues with the argument put forward by Joel Robbins in his seminal essay on the 'suffering slot', namely that anthropology has, since at least the 1990s, 'chang[ed] its relation to those it studied from one of analytic distance and critical comparison focused on difference to one of empathic connection and moral witnessing based on human unity' (Robbins 2013: 453). This realignment of disciplinary orientation not only did it give anthropologists a new foundation away from their 'savage other' past, but it also profoundly influenced the kinds of topics and subjects they are expected to research, as well as their own horizon of interests.

Drawing on the insights above, I argue that two main constellations of subjects worth researching emerged in the new configuration of anthropological orthodoxy: the 'sympathetic other' and the 'radical other'. The two tentative categories are not mutually exclusive but may overlap, that is, the sympathetic other can also (but not necessarily) be a radical other and vice versa. Largely corresponding to Robbins's suffering subject, the sympathetic other is one anthropologists approach from the perspective of shared humanity, recognising a fundamental affinity despite the many differences that may exist between ethnographer and subject of research. The radical other, on the other hand, is one who inhabits a universe so distinct from 'our' own that is barely accessible. Despite Robbins's suggestion that with the shift from the 'savage slot' to the 'suffering slot', anthropology dispensed with the other altogether, the exotic other found its place in the orthodox anthropological repertoire in the form of radical alterity. Most emblematically expressed in the Ontological turn, studies of the radical other not only maintained the centrality of alterity for anthropology but also, as Chua and Mathur observe, a strong, if implicit, contrast between a 'fundamentally Western' anthropological 'we' and a usually non-Western other, which offers 'the concomitant opportunity for collective self-castigation and redemption' (Chua & Mathur 2018: 8).

Both the radical and the sympathetic other (and their possible fusions) are predicated upon a particular moral approach to alterity, one that allows the anthropologist to either translate an otherwise unintelligible and inaccessible universe or elucidate points of affinity and compassion with a wide diversity of (often grim or austere) human conditions. Seen in this light, what has been described so far as uncomfortable alterity does not sit comfortably with either of the two subject categories. Thinking specifically of the far-right other, their alterity is neither sympathetic nor radical. As I will discuss in the next section, it is precisely the *ambiguity* of this alterity, the fact that 'they' are neither radical (in the sense of an irreducible or 'ontological' alterity) nor sympathetic others, that poses the ethical and methodological challenges for anthropologists mentioned above.

One important way the far-right other (in the case of Bolsonarismo, a loose category that stretches from moral and religious conservativism to anti-Communism and militarism) does not fit the sympathetic slot is that they are not usually interpellated by 'grammars of suffering' (Moutinho, Buarque de Almeida & Simões 2020). This does not only *not* make them a likely sympathetic subject to 'us', ethnographers, but offers little common ground for an anthropology searching for a/the suffering subject. For example, in a study conducted by Laura Moutinho, Heloisa Buarque de Almeida, and Júlio Assis Simões with progressive and feminist groups of women, alongside women who identify as politically conservative, the authors observe that 'those who present themselves as conservative women from the right do not use narratives marked by suffering and a sense of vulnerability. [...] Most of the narratives presented do not share values and representations with those who

vocalize, based on various experiences, a subalternized position in the broader social situation' (Moutinho, Buarque de Almeida & Simões 2020: 18).

During my fieldwork with Bolsonaro supporters and people who denied the legitimacy of the 2022 presidential election result, I similarly observed my interlocutors—who generally identified as conservative—brushing-off any hint at a subjectivity of suffering, describing it pejoratively as 'victimhood' or '*mimimi*'. Some of my interlocutors, for example, openly acknowledged being gay yet they strongly opposed LGBTQI+ movements for promoting, in their view, a victimistic approach to being homosexual as well as for giving disproportionate focus on or primacy to their sexual identity, which was for them a private issue that did not define their sociality. Hence, my interlocutors' relation to their own subjectivity, largely rejecting suffering as a lens through which their experiences, past or present, can be inhabited or interpreted propels me to find a different approach to better comprehend their realities.

Of course, it is also worth considering the ways in which even when 'our' interlocutors may indeed fit the suffering slot, 'we' may still find it hard to comply with the anthropologist-citizen imperative. Consider the case of Peter Loizos, a British anthropologist who conducted research with Cypriot refugees over several decades. In a reflexive paper written in a personal and confessional tone, Loizos admits to being disinclined to continue deepening into the history and culture of Cyprus. He feels he wants to 'cut off from it' (Loizos 1994: 51). Among other things, he recognises that at the core of his disenchantment lies his 'deep political disagreement' with most of his interlocutors ('informants', in his words) and with most Greek Cypriots more broadly: 'I am uneasy with the way they see the world, and they do not at all like the way I see the world, so perhaps it is better we stay out of each other's way?', he asks (1994: 51). He appears troubled and uncertain with regards to the nature of his 'contract with [his] informants' (1994: 52), recognising he does not fit the 'active citizen-intellectual' model of anthropologist who 'tak[es] a stand, mak[es] public statements, writ[es] in newspapers, seek[s] to change things in the right direction. I would ideally wish to live this way, but in fact do little' (1994: 51), Loizos confesses.

Does Loizos's struggle describe a change of stance, from sympathy to empathy, as proposed by Gingrich and Banks (2006: 11), 'indispensable for any seriously methodological focus on actors' experiences and perspectives' (ibid) even when we profoundly disagree and are unable to sympathise with them? Shoshan's counter argument is that there is no 'safe distance' from which one can conduct fieldwork (Shoshan 2015: 153). The latter unavoidably involves intimate situations and affective relations that are not accounted for by the 'empathic approach'. Yet Loizos's account points precisely to the opposite direction: a relation between ethnographer and interlocutors that is both intimate and disagreeable, informal and professional, and where ambivalence and frustration do not preclude proximity and affect.

My relationship with my Bolsonarista interlocutors resembles that of Loizos's with his. I too profoundly disagreed with much of the way they saw the world and spent long hours ruminating on the ethical implications of this unfamiliar mixture of intimacy and aversion. But both feelings were there, and one did not exclude the other. I would be self-conscious, for example, about enjoying myself over lunch and storytelling at the house of an army general who amid a convivial discussion would also disclose his admiration for Putin despite, as he put it, him being a Communist. And I would be touched by an interlocutor's gesture of bringing a small gift for my daughter or another's need to confide in me a very delicate personal dilemma and ask for advice. These two people were sweet and caring with me throughout and I genuinely took pleasure in spending time with them, yet it was also unnerving to hear them both defend a military intervention as the only way to 'save' democracy.

I would like to briefly add that my openness to my interlocutors in the field was crucially aided by my interlocutors' openness towards me. Indeed, as much as someone is willing to reach out to the uncomfortable Other and try to understand them in their own terms, this will likely not succeed if that Other is not willing, to some degree, to do the same. In my case, being a foreigner, among other things, helped me tremendously not

to be immediately classified into one or the other of the two sides of the polarization. Eventually, many would ask me about my views on an issue or, more commonly, whether in my country there was a similarly polarized landscape. But the fact that, to put it plainly and in the way many saw it, I had no stakes in the game, helped my interlocutors see me in a more neutral light, even as I pushed them to consider discrepancies in their accounts (how can democracy be protected via a coup d'état?), questioned and disagreed with them openly, and they eventually had a more or less clear idea about where I stood politically. Their sympathetic (or empathetic?) attitude was not of course unconditional: when I tried approaching people at a demonstration together with a Brazilian male colleague who sported a beard and casual wear, we were instantly turned away with people refusing to talk to us because my colleague was immediately seen as '*petista*', with some straightforwardly accusing him of 'doing the L', that is, of having voted for Lula.

The fact that Loizos continued his research with the same groups of Greek Cypriots until the end of his career perhaps attests to the possibility of overcoming ethnographic stalemates, of the usefulness of acknowledging when we hit a bump in the road but then come to terms with it. Because human relations are always complex and multifaceted, and disagreement, even when it is profound and potentially conflictive, is also an inherent part of relating to the other. Not just to the uncomfortable other, but to any other. To approach the uncomfortable other is to accept our own vulnerability and agree to encounter a possible extreme, or a mirror opposite image. And this is an important step forward; a step towards the possibility of meaningfully communicating with the other. Anthropology needs to make the effort of reaching out to uncomfortable alterities; a gesture of tolerance,[3] instead of rejecting the very possibility of approaching specific others. After all, as Lia Zanotta Machado reminds us, 'tolerance should be the first step towards understanding otherness' (Zanotta Machado 2020: 25). I will return to this reflection in the conclusion.

The ambiguous other: Alterity and identity, proximity and distance.

Earlier, Agnieszka Pasieka's account of her experience with colleagues' reactions to her field research, included an observation that the way her peers insisted on treating her interlocutors as 'them', 'convey[ed] an absolute, repulsive otherness' (Pasieka 2019: 3). In this section, I want to argue that the far-right otherness, as indeed other kinds of uncomfortable alterities, may be experienced, and often explicitly presented, as repulsive, but its construction in much anthropological writing appears ultimately more ambiguous than absolute. Indeed, far-right others, when they find their way into ethnographies, emerge as ambivalent intimate others, occupying a position closer to identity than to alterity.

Rosana Pinheiro-Machado and Lucia Mury Scalco's ethnographic study with Bolsonaro supporters, as published in two texts—the first one in 2020 ('From hope to hate: The rise of conservative subjectivity in Brazil') and the second in 2021 ('Humanising fascists? Nuance as an anthropological responsibility')—offers an example of how this ambiguous place figures in anthropological writing. This is one of the early, and thus far few, ethnographic studies of Bolsonarismo, a clear and laudable effort to get out of the anthropological comfort zone and get closer to the 'repugnant' other in order to understand them in their own terms. Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco's research was conducted at different moments over a period of ten years in the favela of Morro da Cruz, in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The 2020 essay is thematically divided in two parts, the first titled 'Hope' and corresponding to research between 2009 and 2014, and the second titled 'Hate', corresponding to return field visits from 2016 to 2019. The authors describe the first part as being 'a moment of precarious hope and ambiguous political mobilization in the Morro' (2020: 22) largely resulting from the 'impacts of Lula's

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3   In the sense of tolerance as respect, rather than tolerance as permission (Forst 2013). While a critical discussion of the liberal notion of tolerance is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that limitations should be considered, including the practice's often condescending and othering expression. See, for example, Ricœur 1988, Brown 2006, Brown and Forst 2014, Lacorne 2019; and for ethnographic insights on tolerance, see Henig 2021, Dubucs 2021.

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financial inclusion on new consumers' lives' (ibid). The second period ('Hate') refers to a change of heart in the Morro, with many of Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco's interlocutors now openly supporting Bolsonaro's presidential candidacy.

The authors describe Bolsonaro as 'an entertainment phenomenon' who '[l]ike Donald Trump ... embodied a type of caricature, a grotesque and funny character' (2020: 25) in stark contrast to their interlocutors who 'were fascinated by the politician and found him to be funny, straightforward, and authentic' (ibid). In the 2020 article they discuss 'punitivism', which, the authors argue, informs their interlocutors' narratives (2020: 27) echoing Bolsonaro's own. Yet, when interlocutors are cited, punitive allusions seem more open-ended. For example, when asked why he liked Bolsonaro, a young man called Anriel places himself as the subject that is being punished, in a rather metaphorical sense, for doing things 'correctly' and not receiving any acknowledgment or benefit. In his view, Bolsonaro as president would value hard workers like himself and he would therefore be able to enjoy the things he has been struggling for: 'a family, [...] a salary, a house, a normal life' (ibid). While the ideal of meritocracy, as the authors promptly note, is immanent in Anriel's account of everyday struggle and moral hierarchies, in his first quote there is hardly any hint at him supporting the candidate because of a punitive promise. Anriel is quoted again reacting to an assault he suffered while working as an Uber driver:

> Some interlocutors believed that life was unjust for those who wanted to work honestly, in contrast with the impunity afforded *vagabundos*. 'I drove 15 hours and a *vagabundo* came and ripped off everything I have. What happened with him? Nothing. Who cares? Nobody', said Anriel, who had his car stolen and also said that he had his cell phone stolen twice by the same thief (ibid).

Anriel's vexation is interpreted by the authors in a punitive key, which is discussed in more detail in the article and with reference to other examples. Anriel asks 'What happened with the thief', to which he himself responds 'Nothing'. Although his frustration is evident at the lack of consequences for the thief (while he was encumbered with the loss of this car and other valuables more than once), and this can indeed imply that he was expecting some sort of negative consequences for the perpetrator (although not necessarily extra-legal or irregular punishment but simply due process), what Anriel says immediately next is not picked up by the authors. 'Who cares? Nobody', Anriel affirms, answering his own question again. His exasperation speaks of his experience of injustice, of not being seen, of being ignored, of not being cared for. And in affirming that 'nobody cares', his candidate preference immediately comes to the fore, someone who unlike other candidates was seen as sincerely caring for such issues.

In my fieldwork with (self-identified) conservative Brazilians, I heard several accounts that echoed Anriel's. Narrated by interlocutors from entirely distinct age, sex, gender, racial, and socio-economic groups, a point where their accounts converged was in the feeling that Bolsonaro was interested in and was fighting for issues that affected them dearly and that they felt no other candidate could or wanted or was otherwise equally invested in addressing. Mônica (a pseudonym), a woman in her 60s and a municipal employee in her city, was telling me about her frustration at the 2022 elections, which she was convinced were rigged ('it has been proven') and at the arrests of 'patriots' in Brasília after the 8 January storming, whom she thought had been cunningly deceived into surrendering without having done anything wrong. It is evident for everyone to see, she said, that the storming was an inside job. While she was detailing her discontent with how things were under Lula's 'dictatorship' she used a trope recurrent among my interlocutors: 'we are witnessing an inversion of values' (*inversão de valores*), she stated firmly.

From '*bandidos*' killing police men without any fear of repercussion to Lula's 'shady dealings' (*roubalheira*) in his travels abroad, criminality goes unchecked in a straight line from the President to the street thief, and everyone is stealing as much as they possibly can, while they can. Mauro (another pseudonym), a man in his 50s put it in similar terms: 'the *bandidos* are being absolved and freed and the judges [from the Lava Jato

anti-corruption investigation] are imprisoned. It is a complete inversion of values. It's frightening'. But there is hope: 'God is fair, Katerina', affirmed Mônica. 'God is fair. He will do something about it, because what happened with the people was a great injustice, you know?'. There is no doubt in Mônica and Mauro's account that this great injustice, and the immorality that brought it about, can only be rectified by the man who in their eyes represents the values they stand for, the man who in many accounts also appears as the archetypal populist personification of 'the people' (Hatzikidi 2023), the anointed leader who has God's blessings to carry on the sweeping changes that will transform Brazilian society and bring it (back) to the path of virtue and order. In this sense, it was not so much a punitivist promise that rallied Brazilians round Bolsonaro but the promise of rectifying perceived injustice, understood very broadly.

In Mauro's, Mônica's, and other interlocutors' accounts, Bolsonaro was seen as the politician who had the courage and capacity to swim against the stream, as many saw it, and correct past and current 'injustices' (*injustiças*). To do so, he would publicly expose 'uncomfortable truths' while working at resolving the issues at the heart of a given problem. With regards to punishing *bandidos*, some would disagree with Bolsonaro's more vocal and aggressive remarks, which they generally qualified as exaggerated, placed out of context, or only paying lip service to the idea of radical punitivism ('*da boca para fora*', as one interlocutor put it). My findings, in that sense, relate more to what Nicole Curato had observed in her fieldwork with Rodrigo Duterte's supporters in the Philippines. Duterte received extraordinary voter support despite a radically aggressive rhetoric of (physically) eradicating criminals. Curato remarked however that this was first and foremost due to 'the promise of justice that comes with it' (Curato 2016: 101) and to the attention, oftentimes received and expressed in terms of care, that he placed upon certain issues, which ultimately outweighed his coarse language (Curato 2016: 102).

In their 2021 article, Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco markedly change the language of their analysis and speak less of 'hate' when describing their interlocutors' views. Like Martínez-Moreno (2021) and Pasieka (2019), in this text they share their bewilderment at their colleagues' reactions to their work presenting Bolsonaristas 'in a thoughtful manner' (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2021: 1). What they did, they explain, was to defend 'the professional and political ethics of portraying far-right supporters as complex and ambiguous individuals [who] do not exist in a vacuum, but in entanglements of relationships and adversities in a wider structural context and dynamic changing process' (2021: 2). They did not turn their interlocutors into 'adorable subjects', they clarify, but into 'intelligible ones' (ibid). 'Brazilians have no choice than to cohabit everywhere with Bolsonarists: parents, relatives, neighbours and workmates. Making this universe intelligible is also a form of coping' (2021: 6), the authors affirm in their closing remarks. In reflecting on their positionality in the field, they suggest that their work cannot be situated on any side of Dullo's (2016) empathic divide (people the anthropologist likes or does not like). And they ask: 'What happens when the line between the horrendous fascist and the vulnerable native becomes increasingly blurred' (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2021: 2)?

Their question, in my view, betrays a fundamental problem for an anthropological perspective caught between a perceived obligation to denounce the abject other (the 'horrendous fascist') and an imperative to cater to the suffering subject (the 'vulnerable native'). The two antithetic subject figures ('bad' and 'good', respectively) correspond to the diptych principle of militant or engaged anthropology: to embrace and advocate for the good, to repudiate and denounce the bad. Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco appear surprised that the two are actually not so neatly apart but the lines that separate them are more indistinct than sharp. What does their surprise tell us about the possibility of conducting fieldwork with the uncomfortable other? Would the line between the 'horrendous fascist' and the 'vulnerable native' be less blurred had their interlocutors not been *favelados* or initially sympathetic former Lula voters and were instead, say, Faria Lima executives? Can Bolsonarists only be approached ethnographically to the extent that they can also be seen as vulnerable or oppressed? And considering the country's brutally polarized political landscape, who are the Brazilians

in general, the Brazilians who have no choice but to 'cohabit' with Bolsonarists? Which Brazilians get to be referred to in universalist-national terms and which Brazilians are cast as 'horrendous fascists' and 'vulnerable natives'? Who, in other words, is placed at the centre and who at the margins of our analyses' social landscapes and why? And, ultimately, who gets to escape being squeezed between abstract and reductionist labels and be understood in their complexity and contradictions?

The problem with the uncomfortable other for anthropological orthodoxy, as it was described above, begins in the conceptualisation of its alterity as ambiguously situated. The uncomfortable other is not a likeable other. But theirs is not a radical (or 'ontological') alterity either. That is to say, it is not an alterity anthropologists have learned to respect, embrace, and try to understand in its complexity. On the contrary, the dearth of ethnographies on abject alterities reveals a tacit acknowledgement of the impossibility to meaningfully engage with certain others. And this, I argue, is in great part because the far-right other (among different abject others) is not *an other to begin with*. Their otherness results from a sameness that derailed. A sameness that is not only dangerous because it has the potential to contaminate, but also because it is treacherous: we cannot always know in advance whom we are facing. The uncomfortable other inhabits the same urban environment as 'we', lives in 'our' apartment building, shares 'our' everyday spaces. They could be like 'me' but they are actually 'my' inverted image: a negative version of the self. And rejection is afforded and even justified precisely because of presumed intimacy. 'We' know them well enough to want to stay away from 'them'. In other words, the uncomfortable other is not ambiguous in their own terms, they are just an ambiguous (if we accord them the possibility of fluidity in their political or other predicament) self, and hence closer to identity than alterity.

Yet this closeness to identity is not one 'we' can encompass. As previously discussed, the sympathetic other's alterity is one anthropologists can readily embrace, if only through the universality of humanity that brings us closer to the subaltern, suffering, or vulnerable other. With the radical other, as Chia and Mathur have suggested, 'an affinity is also assumed: that of an ideological, practical, or political kind that allows for a sympathetic bond to be created between the otherwise irreconcilable alterity' (Chia & Mathur 2018: 8). With the uncomfortable other, however, the ambiguity of their relationship to the self, when not making ethnographic field research a pointless feat, often renders ethnographic analysis an impossible act of conciliation: bringing together the 'horrendous fascist' with the 'vulnerable native'.

In his study with people accused of being members or abettors of militant Islamic groups and their families in Pakistan, Salman Hussain (2021) proposes the term 'ambivalent subjects' to describe his interlocutors who are 'morally and politically ambivalent persons whose actions and histories do not neatly fit the description of the 'ideal' suffering/oppressed subjects involved in 'progressive' struggles, but who, nonetheless, face violence, engage in resistance, and mobilize collectively' (Hussain 2021: 159). Like Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco's study, this is another ethnographically grounded attempt to render intelligibility to the complexities of uncomfortable interlocutors and their lives. Yet, as Mark Goodale (2021) astutely asks in the afterword to the Special Issue Hussain's article was published, 'Who is not, in the end, an 'ambivalent subject'? Who does not, in fact, 'defy easy categorisation'? As it turns out, it is not whether subjects –in the anthropological sense– are 'ambivalent' or not; rather, it is much more a question of who has the power of ascription, who gets to define and apply such reductive social categories and for which purposes' (Goodale 2021: 198).

If I discussed Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco's study here at length is because I consider it to be important. And, as I explained above, for good reasons.[4] Notwithstanding, at the same time they defy anthropological orthodoxy and approach the uncomfortable other ethnographically, they also affirm it. In their effort to render their interlocutors intelligible social actors and show that human life is dynamic and not stagnant, that people can and do change their minds over time, are ambiguous, and 'build their political motivations in a relational

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4   Examining this work more closely does not mean that it is the only anthropological study of Bolsonarismo where the ambiguous alterity of the ethnographic other can be seen. Since it has been an influential study, however, it makes for an illustrative case.

process' (2021: 7) they also succumb to the idea of oppression as (the only?) appropriate ethnographic lens from which to approach the uncomfortable other. Is it really necessary to affirm the oppression of the uncomfortable other, to assert that they do not exist in a vacuum but entertain relationships with other human beings in society, in order to render them intelligible and say something insightful about their lives? My suggestion is that good and bad are best taken as ideal-types and not as bounded materialisations to be identified in the real world. Power dynamics are multidirectional, they are both structural and situated; all humans are ambiguous (or ambivalent), all change and engage with other humans in affective relations. In fact, acknowledging the complexity and multifaceted reality of our interlocutors' lifewords, independently of their political preferences, should be the point of departure for anthropological analyses. The task is to explore the elements that inform and compose these lifewords, their entanglements, and what they mean to the people we talk to.

Conclusion

While writing this article, I was re-reading Susan Harding and Emily Martin's exchange on 'Trump time, prophetic time and the time of the lost cause' (2021), which took place during the pandemic. At some point, when discussing about QAnon and Christian white supremacist militias, Harding appears to be shifting away from her paradigm-making approach to the 'repugnant other': 'Mere empathy and inclusion … are, for me, out of the question' (2021: 34). She acknowledges that '[t]here is still value in knowing as much as we can about them, and [that] we need to learn continuously how to think about and to take seriously reality as they understand it' but asks whether there may be limits for anthropologists who could or should instead 'bend our skills toward debilitating or dismantling–or building the forces that would debilitate or dismantle–their worlds' (ibid). To Harding's question, Martin posits that anthropology can still be the 'translator of assumptions their reality depends upon' (ibid).

It seems to me that Harding's hesitation speaks to the ways the anthropologist-citizen approach can or cannot be imagined to meaningfully contribute to improving the communities and broader societies we live in. Harding asks an important question that many conducting fieldwork with the uncomfortable others she specifically addresses in this text have asked themselves. Should fieldwork be part of activism against the social and political agendas our interlocutors uphold or promote? Can we use our insights to more efficiently deconstruct their ideas and 'dismantle their worlds'? Or is a more modest aspiration, such as that of (only) 'translat[ing the] assumptions their reality depends upon' enough? These are important open-ended questions which I have no intention of addressing here. I leave them mostly as food for thought but I also want to make the suggestion that no matter what action we choose or are able to take *besides or through* fieldwork, the first step is to shed our disciplinary disinclination and embark on fieldwork with the uncomfortable other.

Moral or political identification should not be a criterion that determines whether we can or should conduct field research. As James Laidlaw notes on Malinowski:

His claim to authority, and confidence in the rightness of his analyses, seemed to him to depend not on the quality of his observation or argument but on the personal relationships he was able to maintain with individual Trobrianders and the degree of mental identification he was able to achieve with them; not on professional skills and intelligence, but unexampled sensitivity and unimpeachable moral probity. And of course, by those latter criteria he was bound to fail. (Laidlaw 2018: 156).

Some of the same reasons, argues Laidlaw, were fuelling the anxieties and concerns of Writing Culture: 'a compulsion to try to convince their readers of the depth of their subjective identification with their informants, and the purity of their political sentiments' (ibid). As I have tried to show throughout this text, ethnography does not need to be confined between fieldwork with a 'sympathetic' or a 'radical' other. Not

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only are there risks to consider, such as those Laidlaw flags, in basing our relationship with our interlocutors in our uncompromising alliance with their moral worlds, but there is a great deal of issues worth exploring that 'ge[t] lost when the discipline is confined within such narrow brackets' (Goodale 2021: 198). And not just by not undertaking research with uncomfortable alterities but also when we do but have not entirely shaken the narrow brackets. An 'anthropology of the full spectrum', as Mark Goodale (2021) called for recently, is an anthropology that is attentive to the 'urgent concerns' of today, such as the rise of right-wing extremism (see also Shoshan 2021), and which it approaches with the great analytical depth our discipline is so uniquely positioned to offer.

Indeed, as anthropologists we can work to expand our discipline's horizons of knowledge production and appreciate the value in approaching and understanding (even) the uncomfortable other. Importantly, however, the anthropological encounter with the uncomfortable alterity cannot 'take place in a specular way, as the Other were 'less' than the 'self': a 'fallen self', or a 'lower self'', which would be an approach based on intolerance (Zanotta Machado 2020: 26), but in a symmetrically tolerant or respectful way, seeking the self in the other and the other in the self.

As Gingrich stresses, discussing alterity exclusively in terms of difference is to essentialise; to 'represen[t] difference as something altogether external to identity', in a 'dichotomous arrangement', when actually 'othering and belonging are mutually constitutive components of identity' (Gingrich 2004: 4). A more useful approach, Gingrich suggests, is 'Spivak's constant shift of positions between identity and difference, one becoming part of the other in different constellations' (2004: 11; see also Fabian 2006). In light of the earlier discussion of the (uncomfortable) other's ambiguous relation to the self, this insight encourages us to embrace this ambiguity, to explore and learn from it. I want to close this text with Leonardo Carbonieri Campoy's (2022) reflection on the anthropological craft being about 'learning to keep the question about the other and about ourselves open' (2022: 66; my translation).

Acknowledgments

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