

Broadening the horizons of anthropological understanding:  
ethnographies with ‘uncomfortable otherness’

# From ‘Humiliation’ to Radical Beliefs: Navigating political subjectivities and ideological shifts in trajectories of radicalization.

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## **Abstract**

This essay delves into the analysis of the radicalization trajectory of supporters of the Early and Preventive Treatment (TPP), contextualizing it within the Brazilian political and social scenario during the 2023 elections. The focus lies on practices, both discursive and non-discursive, influencing contemporary adherence to far-right ideologies. In particular, the paper highlights how the far-right establishes effective communication with society, exploring Sonia’s central role in becoming an active part of a discursive community. The narrative examines her quest for knowledge, often grounded in fake news and studies without scientific review, related to the TPP. The article explores the dynamics between social inclusion, information-seeking, and the legitimization of identity, emphasizing the importance of situational discomfort in constructing the ethnographic project. The adopted approach highlights local practices as authentic political theories and underscores the need to understand how extreme ideologies are normalized and internalized by social subjects, providing a robust conceptual foundation for analyzing the complexities of radicalization and identity formation in the Brazilian political context.

**Keywords:** Political Subjectivities; Truth; Moral person.

# De la «Humillación» a las Creencias Radicales: Navegando las subjetividades políticas y los cambios ideológicos en trayectorias de radicalización. Resumen

## **Resumen:**

Este ensayo profundiza en el análisis de la trayectoria de radicalización de los partidarios del Tratamiento Precoz y Preventivo (TPP), contextualizándolo en el escenario político y social brasileño durante las elecciones de 2023. El enfoque se centra en las prácticas, tanto discursivas como no discursivas, que influyen en la adhesión contemporánea a las ideologías de extrema derecha. En particular, el artículo destaca cómo la extrema derecha establece una comunicación efectiva con la sociedad, explorando el papel central de Sonia al convertirse en parte activa de una comunidad discursiva. La narrativa examina su búsqueda de conocimiento, a menudo basada en noticias falsas y estudios sin revisión científica, relacionados con el TPP. El artículo explora las dinámicas entre la inclusión social, la búsqueda de información y la legitimación de la identidad, enfatizando la importancia del malestar situacional en la construcción del proyecto etnográfico. El enfoque adoptado destaca las prácticas locales como teorías políticas auténticas y subraya la necesidad de comprender cómo las ideologías extremas se normalizan e internalizan por los sujetos sociales, proporcionando una base conceptual sólida para analizar las complejidades de la radicalización y la formación de identidades en el contexto político brasileño.

**Palabras clave:** Subjetividades Políticas; verdad; persona moral.

# Da ‘Humilhação’ a Crenças Radicais: Navegando por subjetividades políticas e mudanças ideológicas em trajetórias de radicalização.

## Resumo

Este ensaio aprofunda a análise da trajetória de radicalização dos apoiadores do Tratamento Precoce e Preventivo (TPP), contextualizando-a dentro do cenário político e social brasileiro durante as eleições de 2023. O foco está nas práticas, tanto discursivas quanto não discursivas, que influenciam a adesão contemporânea a ideologias de extrema direita. Em particular, o artigo destaca como a extrema direita estabelece uma comunicação eficaz com a sociedade, explorando o papel central de Sonia ao se tornar uma parte ativa de uma comunidade discursiva. A narrativa examina sua busca por conhecimento, frequentemente fundamentada em notícias falsas e estudos sem revisão científica, relacionados ao TPP. O artigo explora as dinâmicas entre inclusão social, busca por informações e a legitimação da identidade, enfatizando a importância do desconforto situacional na construção do projeto etnográfico. A abordagem adotada ressalta as práticas locais como teorias políticas autênticas e sublinha a necessidade de compreender como ideologias extremas são normalizadas e internalizadas por sujeitos sociais, proporcionando uma base conceitual robusta para a análise das complexidades da radicalização e da formação de identidade no contexto político brasileiro.

**Palavras-chave:** Subjetividades Políticas; Verdade; Pessoa Moral.

# From ‘Humiliation’ to Radical Beliefs: Navigating political subjectivities and ideological shifts in trajectories of radicalization.

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## Introduction

‘Never has anyone cared about me, then overnight I became essential; it’s funny,’ Sonia told me in one of our conversations. A proponent of the use of unproven medications in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil and proud to identify herself as far-right, which she considers the ‘true Right,’ Sonia upset the already unequal conditions of our contact since our first meeting, presenting herself as someone who ‘*knows the truth, and that’s why she acts, and that’s why you came here, to learn the truth of things.*’

Seeing herself as a researcher who carefully collects and organizes data in the production of her individual position, Sonia asked me numerous times if I was ready to learn the ‘*truth of things.*’ My interlocutor subverted the figure of the researcher into that of the apprentice, one who needs to learn to read the world, to piece together the puzzle, and thus reconstruct the picture of truth, always defined as frightening, terrible, shocking.

At times, it was indeed shocking to encounter narratives about the pandemic and its modes of confrontation, and the equivalences produced between the individual body and the body of the nation, attacked by the virus of ‘extreme left-wing ideology’ or ‘communism,’ or more commonly, ‘petism’.<sup>1</sup> Sonia knew she occupied a privileged position, someone who could give me access to the world of ideological production of the far-right in the context of the pandemic, what I called ‘pandemic Bolsonaroism’ (Alves da Silva 2023).

Sonia was deemed an essential worker and therefore left her home every day during social isolation. For her, this was a way for the ‘powerful’ to protect themselves and let ‘poor souls die.’ It was when she felt at risk that she began researching the Early Treatment protocol, which consists of a combination of various medications, vitamins, and supplements as a means of preventing Sars-Cov-2 infection. My interlocutor laments what she considers the ‘shame and humiliation’ inflicted by information sources, scientists, and doctors on protocol users. For her, the protocol saved lives and was crucial in revealing the power struggle that, according to Sonia, motivated and sustained the pandemic.

Unable to isolate herself and living with her mother, an elderly woman considered at higher risk of developing severe forms of the disease, Sonia maintained her shifts at the supermarket, crossing a capital in the northern part of the country by bus every day. Exposing herself at work and in transportation, she began researching prevention methods and found various YouTube channels and Instagram profiles of doctors with tips, explanatory videos, and personalized consultations through question boxes.

The worker, who had voted for Jair Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections because ‘things couldn’t stay the way they were,’ began to radicalize as she exposed herself to content on the internet, especially in WhatsApp groups, where we met. Over the two years of our contact, I witnessed a process of deep radicalization and the consequent reorientation of her social subjectivity in the relational web (Duarte 1986; Mauss 2003: 1; Das 1995; Boltanski & Thévenot 1991). The pandemic and the feeling of being ‘left behind’ constitute a social event that descended into the worker’s everyday life, reorganizing her relationships, positions, and worldview. The

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<sup>1</sup> Petism and Petist are terms used by the Brazilian far-right to refer to left-wing sectors in general, conflating them with the Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores). A person labeled as Petista is not necessarily a member or supporter of the party. These terms broadly designate the left rather than specifying any particular affiliation.

populist dichotomy of the elite against the people (Mudde 2007: 19; Laclau 2005; Glynos & Mondon 2016) was redefined around the idea of a power struggle, a struggle in which the powerful denied access to medications to kill right-wing people, the 'good citizens,' individuals committed to 'the truth of things.'

Similar to Nitzan Shoshan's (2016) exploration of the precariously employed young far-right individuals in Germany, this article explores the position of a precarious worker in Brazil within the context of national construction or the remoralization of the nation. Shoshan argues that the figure of the far-right extremist, often repudiated by the political community and democratic ideals, continues to exist despite not being considered reasonable. These individuals' trajectories resemble those of thousands of other precarious workers, whose situation would elicit empathy in any other context. Thus, extremism can be considered, as suggested by Shoshan (2016), as a ghost personifying the fears and anxieties of a nation laden with memories and taboos in the context of a global public health emergency.

This article, therefore, deals with the formation of political subjectivities in the face of critical social events (Das 1995) that drastically alter the subject's relationship with the objects of human experience (Harding *et al.* 2021), accelerating an already ongoing process of radicalisation.

It involves examining how disputes around the notion of truth construct objects in a discursive construction that responds to a certain relationship between knowledge and power (Foucault 2008). As the minimum unit of discourse, statements of truth and disputes around modalities of understanding and communicating the world and social phenomena elucidate Foucault's postulate that 'where there is truth, there is power, and where there is power, there is truth.' In its circularity, power does not do without contact with true objects, i.e., objects constituted by signs of truth (*ibid.*, 2008). As the author stated, the exercise of power requires the manifestation of truth, which is presented through the production of social facts through knowledge (knowledge opens up a field for power in a circular relationship).

In this context, the social subjects represented here will be understood in their work of argumentative dispute about an ultimate truth of things, the concealment of which would respond to a conspiracy between the powerful and the system. It is evident that the challenge of working with extreme realities frames the entire analysis and re-centres its necessity, especially with the concern to give voice to social subjects who defend the indefensible. However, I question, before anything else, the political-epistemological consequences of not understanding how the set of techniques, tactics, and infrastructure that shape discourses operate, positioning individuals on trajectories of radicalization.

## **Researching, knowing, acting, and protecting: trajectories of radicalisation**

Sonia and her friends were engaged in the constant, daily work of 'knowing' the truth. The process of knowledge was described as cruel, and painful, but capable of repositioning the social subject in the framework of social relations, allowing them to see what 'we couldn't see before, then everything changes, everything, family, friends, everything changes, and we start to be called crazy.' What my interlocutors referred to as 'knowing' is nothing more than the process of deepening into conspiracy theories and the radicalisation process. Thus, the more they 'know,' the more displaced they become from the general social framework, and thus, they consider WhatsApp and Telegram groups as possible places of congregation of experiences.

The term 'trajectories of radicalisation' aims to describe the social process that marks the creation of a fundamental difference, highlighting the social subject from the relational flow and morally repositioning them in the world (Udupa *et al.* 2017, 2023; Shoshan 2016). This process is mediated by technologies and their technical infrastructures and dynamic algorithms (Udupa *et al.* 2020; Pohjonem & Udupa & McDowell 2017; Cesarino 2020b), but not only. The process of radicalisation occurs differently in the online and offline universes, and although these two dimensions feed each other, both have organisational landscapes and contexts that feed and structure them.

Sahana Udupa and contributors, in proposing the concept of extreme speech (Udupa 2020) instead of hate speech, emphasizes that extreme discourse highlights the profound contextualisation of online speech acts in various cultural, social, and political contexts on a global scale. This approach takes into account the cultural variation of speech acts, the norms associated with them, and the historical contexts that shape them. In this perspective, the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable discourse is not clearly defined by the author, constantly reassessed in public and political discussions, and the boundaries are continually readjusted, employed, and distorted. The analysis of extreme speech encompasses digital cultures that challenge the limits of legitimate discourse in terms of truth-falsehood and civility-incivility (Udupa et al 2019, 2020, 2023).

The term 'trajectories of radicalization' aims to mark that people radicalize over time, the conditions of radicalization occur inside and outside virtual environments, but reposition the individual in their immediate social networks (it is a process of moral conversion), and it implies a fundamental relational pole in justifying the 'fight' against the evil people, the indefensible, those who do not study and, thus, do not position themselves in the fight for the nation (Udupa et al 2019; Kleinman 2006). This was how Sonia and her friends saw me, and our relationship was marked by accusations of a lack of commitment to the fight, little knowledge, and a 'negligent' attitude toward the overall picture to which I was exposed.

In a movement similar to anthropologist Nitzan Shoshan (2016), the goal is to reconstruct the everyday landscapes of otherness and constructions of the enemy, reflecting on the conditions and possibilities for ethnographic encounter, especially because my position as a researcher was a fundamental point of access and ethnographic negotiation. The technical infrastructures for access and sharing of news and the possibilities of building virtual communities of hate will be presented through the subjects' experiences in their narratives of 'knowledge.' Throughout my research, my position was clear to my interlocutors.

However, they constantly told me that I only knew 'one side of the story, the wrong side.' Presenting herself as a kind of guru, guide, or even as a guardian of a fundamental truth, Sonia was willing to present me with the truth, and expose me to the content of knowledge, but warned me that the critical point was not the content I would deal with but how I would use it and where I would place it in my personal history and political experience in Brazil.

Throughout the development of our relationship, Sonia constantly sent me videos, news, and information profiles to give me access to the 'truth' about the pandemic and medications. In trying to convince me of the benefits of medications, she always spoke of individual freedom in a scenario of deep knowledge of the implications of choices. Sonia also taught me about the body and its integrative view, that is, understanding it as a general system of functioning that relates its physical, nutritional, and moral aspects. 'You have to know, you need to learn,' the videos taught, were constant phrases uttered by Sonia and the people she introduced me to for further conversations, thus constituting a semantic field of communication about the body and disease in the pandemic context.

Navigating through social groups on Telegram, and WhatsApp, and watching hundreds of live streams and IGTV videos on Instagram, Sonia was 'connecting the pieces,' doing what one of her colleagues called 'patchwork,' that is, the difficult work of pasting the pieces of a fragmented reality in the reconstruction of a totality, the truth to be accessed. The closer the final reconstruction of the picture, the more radicalized her position became, mixing fake news, individual beliefs, mysticism, and theories that considered deaths from COVID-19 as resulting from a new energetic moment on planet Earth (Alves da Silva 2023).

However, knowing implies acting, either in the reconstruction of the 'truth' or in the fight against those who, in some way, 'try to prevent us from knowing' (Sonia). The search for information, whether in social groups or through videos and video lectures on Instagram or YouTube, repositions the individual in the social fabric (Alves da Silva 2023; Pavessi & Valentin 2019; Sunstein & Vermeule 2009) through the idea that there are evil individuals in collusion with big pharmaceutical industries with profit interests in people's deaths. Access to truth, therefore,

implies accessing a possibility of deviation from an 'evil' plan, so acting is fundamental. Therefore, the search for 'truth' and the process of knowing imply establishing a warlike landscape in which the enemy and the reason to be fought are constructed (Udupa et al 2023; Nelvo 2020; Cho 2008; Kleinman 2006; Das 1995).

Just as in politics, it is the collective fight for truth and the defense of what is moral, just, and effective that motivates and gives meaning to the collective activity concerned with the body and the individual. An inheritor of individualistic ideology, this perception is surrounded by elements of political struggle illustrated in the speech of the then President of the Republic, which opens this chapter. In the name of defending individuality, freedom, and individual choice, this political rationality manages to align public health and governability, indicating an entirely new relationship between technology, health, and nation-building.

Sonia's perspective emphasizes the importance of knowing and acting based on that knowledge. She justifies how she came to know the truth about the pandemic and how this truth reshaped her understanding of health and politics:

It's like this: before the pandemic, anything, you go to the doctor, you go to the hospital, you don't wait at home. But now, the person has to stay at home, die at home, without air? So it's like, oh, it's science, it's the truth, and then every hour it's something else, wash food, don't wash food, while the worker is starving without being able to work. On television, only death, just death, but with doctors saying that we can prevent, we can do something. Who do we believe? It's the choice you mentioned, we keep choosing. I myself thought, you know, for everything, we take medicine to prevent, and now nothing? Strange, that's when I saw it, that's when science spoke about the medicines, doctors, journalists being persecuted, everything, everything. I read a lot, I see a lot of studies, many doctors, you know, persecuted everywhere. So it's connecting the dots, linking things. The virus appears, and then you can't use the medicines you have? What do you do then, die waiting? (...) There's something that I know Janaína told you because she told me everything; it's true, you know, about believing in what we trust. The doctor spoke, presented everything, you know, the data, talked about the people they treat, and then we started to understand what that medicine does. Like Ivermectin, did you know it doesn't metabolize in the stomach? It's in the intestine, so it's not toxic. But then it's like this: everyone chooses what to do with what they've found out. I chose, you chose, it's a choice, we're not obliged to anything in this life, we choose. I chose the right thing, I chose, but I chose, so sometimes you might think I'm stupid, but I read and researched a lot, you know? (...) There is persecution, yes, don't come with that, there is, if you don't want to see it, want to stay blind, it's your problem, your choice, but there is, I'll send you the screenshot I received here.

Conspiracy theories<sup>2</sup>, disastrous worlds, and the struggle between good and evil provide the framework (Goffman & Titton 2012), first for the interpretation of social reality for these agents, and medical authority reinforces the appeal to medications. These professionals not only recommend and support these substances but also provide explanations about their efficacy and metabolism process.

The perception that society or the Brazilian nation, composed of righteous citizens—as Sonia defined—is sick and, therefore, needs to be rehabilitated through therapies and therapeutic itineraries. According to the framing model proposed by Goffman and Titton (2012), an individual's experience in the world is, in a sense, a result of how they frame the reality that surrounds them. Therefore, what each individual considers as real results from how they decode, signify, and interpret the world. Thus, frames are always undertaken from an individual perspective, meaning, '(...) the facts and events on which some awareness is directed are only integrated

<sup>2</sup> I am defining and classifying as conspiracy theories all interpretations of the pandemic that combined medical and political elements to construct a worldview framed as a struggle between good and evil. By doing so, I aim to demonstrate how these alternative interpretations have intersected with latent social vulnerabilities, making politically disconnected discourses more acceptable. However, the reference point for the concept of conspiracy is factuality. Despite being linked to social processes and existing inequalities, these interpretations are not supported either by scientific discourse or factual analysis. This is evidenced by the fact that the peaks of the pandemic coincided with the peaks in the consumption of medications, indicating that these remedies did not lead to a reduction in deaths or infections. This factuality underscores the concept of conspiracy.

into a person's experience when interpreted and encoded as objects of attention' (Hangai 2012: 2). In the case of social groups and the quest for knowledge, the massification of messages and the broad reach allow individual perspectives on reality, decoding processes, and signification of facts to compete with collective conceptions—shared readings of the world among 'citizens of virtue,' those concerned and committed to the truth of facts.

## **Social Media, Identities, and Communities**

Sonia's engagement with conspiracy theories and the radical redefinition of her worldview through social media not only altered her perception of the pandemic but also allowed her to challenge traditional modes of knowledge and authority. By immersing herself in these alternative discourses, Sonia felt she had gained access to a privileged form of understanding, one that she perceived as superior to the conventional narratives propagated by mainstream media and academic circles. This newfound knowledge enabled her to articulate and critique issues such as healthcare access and social inequality from a standpoint that she saw as aligned with, or even surpassing, the traditional expertise of the middle and upper classes. For Sonia, the capacity to mobilize a semantic field previously reserved for these groups granted her a sense of empowerment and legitimacy that was both deeply personal and politically charged.

Considering the sentiment of anti-intellectualism within Sonia's perspective reveals a profound distrust in traditional scientific authorities, which is emblematic of broader socio-political trends exacerbated by the internet. Sonia's alignment with alternative viewpoints on COVID-19, such as the use of unproven treatments, reflects a rejection of what she perceives as elitist scientific communication. This skepticism is amplified by online spaces that often capitalize on and magnify anti-intellectual sentiments. Social media platforms provide a fertile ground for the proliferation of conspiracy theories and alternative narratives by framing them as counter-cultural or resistant to a purportedly corrupt establishment. Such platforms not only validate Sonia's views by presenting them as part of a broader, populist struggle against an out-of-touch elite but also offer a sense of community and agency. This interaction underscores how the internet can transform anti-intellectualism from a fringe perspective into a potent political and social force, leveraging the power of collective grievance and the perceived marginalization of traditional scientific discourse.

In this process, Sonia did not merely see herself as part of a community but as a distinctive voice within it. She embraced the role of a seeker of truth, one who had uncovered insights often hidden from broader societal discourse. This self-perception was crucial to her identity; she wanted to be portrayed as someone who was actively engaged in a quest for knowledge and understanding. Her engagement with alternative narratives and her critical stance against mainstream information sources were not just about aligning with a particular political ideology but were intrinsically tied to her desire to be recognized as an authoritative figure in her own right. Additionally, Sahana Udupa and contributors' (2020) approach to 'extreme speech' is relevant here. Sonia and her interlocutors, by adopting and disseminating conspiracy theories and alternative viewpoints, are not only participating in a polarized discourse but also engaging in a communicative practice that redefines the boundaries of what is politically acceptable. Through her lens, the pursuit of truth and the critique of established institutions became a means of asserting her position and challenging the status quo.

Sonia's insistence on her perspective as one of deep understanding and critical insight was intertwined with her rejection of the conventional representation of her socio-economic class. She felt that the dominant narratives of her time failed to adequately address the real issues faced by people in precarious conditions. Her discourse was, therefore, not merely an opposition to established knowledge but a reassertion of her own agency within a broader socio-political context. By positioning herself within this new semantic and discursive space, Sonia sought to redefine her place in the social hierarchy and challenge the traditional power dynamics between different classes and forms of knowledge.



However, my understanding of how Sonia interpreted the pandemic scenario through means that gave her agency and connected to significant communication issues in health intersected with my own personal experience with COVID-19. Having lost three relatives in the same week to SARS-CoV-2, it was difficult for me to hear about alternative treatments and the emphasis on individual responsibility for one's own health. My personal experience drew me closer to a normative perspective of science, which I had previously been more critical of. For me, these modalities of understanding the world could be defined as conspiracy theories, but for Sonia, they represented the possibility of constituting a coherent understanding. This tension highlighted the challenge of maintaining an empathetic and critical stance as an anthropologist while grappling with the emotional weight of personal loss and the scientific discourse I had once critiqued.

Another pivotal element in the clash of perspectives was the incident in which Sonia attacked me in a WhatsApp group. As a member of this group for several months, I had introduced myself as a researcher interested in conducting interviews at a time when journalists were leaking conversations from such groups, and doctors were facing disciplinary actions by the Federal Medical Council. On this occasion, I was perceived as a disguised journalist and was subsequently attacked by the group members, including Sonia. A primary weapon in this attack was the exposure of my social media profiles and a Facebook post by a cousin about the death of our family members. The group attributed these deaths to divine intervention due to my 'denialist' stance on early treatment for COVID-19 and held me responsible for the fatalities. This episode was central to my relationship with Sonia, as she reinforced these accusations within the group, despite privately sending me a message expressing solidarity. This incident not only deepened the tension between my personal and professional identities but also highlighted the complex dynamics of trust and hostility that can emerge in ethnographic research, particularly when the researcher is personally implicated in the subject matter.

The dynamic between Sonia's radicalized perspective and my own values as a researcher was a constant point of tension throughout our interactions. While my approach was grounded in understanding and empathy, the values and theories that Sonia espoused often starkly contrasted with my own academic and political stance. This tension underscored the challenge of navigating ethnographic research in politically charged environments, where the researcher's positionality and the interlocutor's worldview can come into sharp conflict.

Ultimately, Sonia's narrative exemplifies the broader impact of conspiracy theories and alternative discourses on individual and collective identity. Her transformation from a skeptical worker to a self-identified bearer of hidden truths highlights how such discourses can reshape personal and social understandings, allowing individuals to feel a sense of empowerment and legitimacy. For Sonia, the act of 'knowing' was not just about acquiring information but about asserting her place within a new epistemological framework that she believed better addressed her lived experiences and societal grievances.

In portraying Sonia's experience, it is crucial to recognize her perspective as a genuine attempt to seek and represent a form of truth that resonated with her lived reality. Her desire to be seen as a knowledgeable and critical voice was not merely a personal ambition but a reflection of a broader struggle for recognition and legitimacy within a landscape marked by profound inequalities and contested narratives. By engaging with her perspective, we gain insight into how alternative discourses can offer new ways of understanding and addressing the complexities of social and political life.

Spivak's critique of post-structuralist thinkers underscores a critical dimension of Sonia's engagement with alternative narratives. Spivak argues that these philosophers often overlook the epistemic violence of imperialism, perpetuating a notion of the subject who speaks and writes on behalf of the marginalized, rather than acknowledging their own agency and lived realities. This critique aligns with Sonia's experience, as her immersion in alternative discourses and conspiracy theories reflects a response to traditional modes of knowledge that she felt were inadequate in addressing her socio-political context. This is why Sonia is averse to my position as a researcher; she understands that, ultimately, I hold the power of representation. By contesting

the ways she wants to be portrayed, she emphasizes her position as someone who seeks knowledge, portraying herself as an 'active' person.

Sonia's radical redefinition of her worldview through social media allowed her to challenge conventional narratives and authorities in ways that parallel Spivak's concern. By engaging deeply with these alternative perspectives, Sonia felt she had accessed a privileged form of understanding that surpassed the traditional expertise of the middle and upper classes. This aligns with Spivak's critique, as Sonia's process of 'connecting the dots' and critiquing mainstream media and academic circles mirrors the critique of how dominant epistemic frameworks often ignore or marginalize alternative voices.

### **Modes of Reaction: The Moral Repositioning of the Subject and Protection Strategies**

Sonia and her colleagues believed they needed to protect themselves not only from 'bad people' but also from the audacity of scientists trying to tell them what to do. Sonia's experience in acquiring knowledge was different; the doctors she consulted with, followed, and interacted with on social media during the pandemic told her that using the advocated medications was a matter of choice, but that choice could only be made with the necessary knowledge. For Sonia, scientific communication was quite rigid and impersonal, not considering the particularities of her life, unlike the doctors she was in contact with through Instagram Q&A sessions.

The warlike landscape, as she called it, produced by the capture of public health discussions within the political grammar of national defense made Sonia feel constantly under attack. It was as if she couldn't share what she discovered in her research, making her spend even more time with social group friends, whom she called 'family.' In an excerpt from my field diary, I noted:

She feels she can't communicate what she researches because she will be perceived as crazy, extremist, and ridiculed. She also said that people, 'like you,' probably referring to researchers, like to speak with difficult words to seem smarter. I really think she can't understand scientific communication, which is always very technical, driving her into the videos that the far-right spreads about the body and the nation. Sonia's refusal might be a rejection of a knowledge system in which she doesn't participate. She feels included and believes that in social groups, her voice and opinion are respected. That's why they attack in groups, she told me. They feel they will be exposed, so they expose themselves first. There's something interesting here, which is how the far-right managed to handle agency and communicative forms in a context of political, health, and expert system crises (Field Note, November 2022).

'They laugh at us, make us look like fools,' Sonia said as she narrated her resentment towards how traditional media portrays those who dare to see what no one wants to see. For her, it's not just about the conditions of joining the group, but also about the lack of care in depicting what is discussed there because everything has a deeper meaning. We're not a bunch of crazies, as they want to portray in the news for people to think. By decontextualizing the uses, which is an emergency, right, an emergency because something needs to be done, and not highlighting the struggle of medicine based on experience fueled by the medical desire, or some doctors, to save lives, caricatures were produced as portraits of these users. Throughout our contact, Sonia insisted a lot that I reaffirm the active nature of her participation in the groups, to separate her from any possibility of association with the image of an alienated person, a word she abhors, 'I think it's horrible because they only use it for us, for them, nothing. When you write your book, put there that we study a lot, we seek a lot of information, and maybe that's why we resent when they don't give relevance to our knowledge work.'

Sonia's resentment is deeply tied to her experiences of humiliation, both personal and collective. Her frustration with mainstream scientific communication and her subsequent alignment with alternative viewpoints can be seen as a response to the perceived disregard and belittlement of her experiences and knowledge by established authorities. The humiliation she feels is compounded by the broader socio-political

context in which her views are dismissed and ridiculed. This process of humiliation fosters a defensive posture, where Sonia and her peers seek to reclaim their dignity and assert their autonomy through alternative narratives. The far-right's ability to capitalize on this resentment involves framing their perspectives as a legitimate counterpoint to a dismissive elite, thus transforming personal humiliation into a collective political stance. This dynamic illustrates how deeply felt emotions of humiliation can fuel radicalization and reshape one's engagement with socio-political and scientific discourses.

To interrupt the flow of humiliation, the activation of groups is crucial as it allows working on the very process of degradation and ridicule, giving these new connotations and meanings. If, as Didier Eribon (2008) demonstrated, the insult reverberates deeply in the individual's consciousness, especially for what it says to them, we can understand the groups as a rejection of what the process of ridicule recalls and affirms. It is, therefore, a response to this memory, a way of not accepting the social space reserved for these individuals, and a vehement assertion that 'this is not me.' Thus, being brave by choosing to see what no one wants to see can be considered a result of this work on the very substance of exposure, the composition of new layers of meaning for such a traumatic event in a person's life: exposure and ridicule by friends 'of a lifetime.'

If we consider, as Avishai Margalit (1998, 2007) does, that humiliation induces in the person a feeling of being subhuman, incomplete, and worthless, it becomes clear that the individual's first task exposed to this dynamic is their holistic recomposition, that is, their redefinition and reaffirmation as a complete and total person. Maria Elvira Diaz Benitez (2022) demonstrated in her careful ethnography of women attacked with acid in Colombia that the attack aims to produce a permanent state of humiliation and degradation because the goal is to strip the person of their humanity through a theatricalization of excess (Blair 2005). Thus, the feeling that someone can be degraded allows Sonia to degrade, or at least gives her elements to justify her actions. Sonia and I met in a group, as known so far. What I haven't told is that Sonia was one of the people who joined a degradation process to which I was subjected in a WhatsApp group.

Sonia, using screenshots sent by another member of the Facebook group, mocked the death of three of my family members from COVID-19, associating the deaths with divine intervention. Minutes after her message, she sent me a private one saying she regretted my pain and that no one should feel it. After the performance in front of her peers, in private, she told me she understood the extent of my pain and asked me to understand that her colleagues; they were just hurt, like me. Everyone felt left behind by the science communication strategies at the beginning of the pandemic and needed to work at a time when many of us were isolated. She said they needed to understand better, and social media was fundamental to them, because they did what 'none of the famous doctors did'. It was in this process that they started taking medication to feel 'a little protected.'

Sonia became more radicalized<sup>3</sup> over the two years we had contact. Despite our first meeting already being under adverse circumstances, her positions became increasingly political as the 2023 elections approached. The entire universe Sonia was part of transformed into a machine for producing interpretations of social reality, proposing solutions to what they called the 'disease of the nation'—meaning the left supporters (Alves da Silva 2023). Despite her adverse position, Sonia started joining WhatsApp groups because she felt excluded, despite being considered an essential worker.

Her resentment stemmed from the contradiction of being essential and therefore unable to isolate, as many of us did. Her difficulty in understanding the disseminated protocols and also regarding the future brought the worker closer to the social groups managed by the far-right in Brazil, with a reductionist and scientifically unproven proposition. Conspiracy theories and the division of the world into good and evil did not appear,

<sup>3</sup> By 'radicalization,' I understand the process of deepening engagement with alternative theories, effectively distancing oneself from scientific conventions, and applying a biologist model to the understanding of the 'political struggle' (Alves da Silva 2023). This process involves an increasingly profound immersion in narratives that challenge established scientific knowledge and use biological concepts in a distorted manner to explain social and political phenomena. Radicalization, in this sense, is not merely a rejection of scientific consensus but also an epistemological reorganization that redefines ways of understanding and acting in the world, attributing political meanings to scientific concepts

in this sense, as symptoms of individual anxieties (Harding & Stewart 2003), but as a possible response, mixing political views and structural precarities, to the crisis in question. Conspiracy theories allowed Sonia to assemble the 'pieces' and rebuild her own framework of understanding.

Thus, far-right movements during Covid-19 in Brazil captured the communication space inaugurated by the public health emergency to propose connections and interpretations that were not only more easily assimilable but also conferred agency to the social subject. That is, through access to the 'truth,' the person could choose whether to take the medications or not. Sonia's radicalization process is intertwined with her perception of becoming as competent as a specialist. The political developments during the pandemic allowed political groups to inaugurate communication channels that addressed classical problems in science communication, such as the ability to understand technical terms, and presented these as individual choices.

Thus, what I have referred to here as conspiracy theories or alternative explanations, based on my own political-moral framework and particularly informed by the incident of my family members' deaths, constituted for Sonia a lingua franca of the war scenario she perceived herself to be living in. For her, connecting the dots, engaging in 'patchwork,' implied gaining possession of a world of entirely new meanings, where she was not a mere passive observer of the technical unfolding of health discussions. Instead, it was a world in which she actively sought to understand the environment she inhabited and to position herself in relation to it. This world mediated by language cannot, however, be reified as merely semantic. It involves a process of feeling 'equal,' of being able to speak like doctors and to make decisions independently, based on the values of liberal democracy, albeit inverted, of individual freedom and autonomy in a manner similar to what Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco (2021) termed the 'right to shine.'

As an anthropologist, my methodological approach has consistently emphasized the importance of understanding and representing the native perspective. However, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced a paradoxical challenge, compelling me to defend the scientific perspective that I have often subjected to critical analysis. Engaging with interlocutors who adhered to conspiracy theories and alternative treatments for COVID-19 necessitated a nuanced approach. It became imperative to critically examine these perspectives rather than merely documenting them. This challenge was compounded by my personal experiences with the pandemic, particularly the loss of family members to COVID-19. These experiences inevitably influenced my stance, creating a distance from the alternative theories that some of my interlocutors, like Sonia, espoused.

This duality—my role as a researcher committed to empathetically understanding my subjects and my personal connection to the scientific discourse on COVID-19—became a central tension in my fieldwork. The negotiation of this tension was evident in the interactions and conversations between Sonia and myself, highlighting the complex interplay between personal experience and professional responsibility. Thus, the pandemic underscored the intricate balance required in ethnographic research, where the imperative to critically engage with interlocutors' beliefs must be weighed against the need to empathetically understand and represent their perspectives.

## Conclusion

Navigating the complex dynamics of ethnographic research with subjects who hold opposing beliefs can be an immensely challenging endeavor. My interactions with Sonia underscore this difficulty, as her radical departure from conventional scientific understanding starkly contrasted with my personal experiences and professional stance. For Sonia, conspiracy theories and alternative explanations about COVID-19 represented a means of reclaiming agency in a world she felt was increasingly hostile and dismissive. Her rejection of mainstream scientific narratives was not merely a matter of disagreement but a profound reassertion of her own worldview and sense of self in the face of what she perceived as an oppressive status quo.

This tension was particularly acute given my own personal loss—having lost three relatives to COVID-19, my emotional response to Sonia's views on alternative treatments and conspiracy theories was deeply charged. My personal grief and subsequent alignment with the scientific consensus created a significant distance between our perspectives. Sonia's engagement with alternative narratives was, from her vantage point, a form of empowerment and resistance against a system she felt marginalized by. In contrast, my position was informed by a need to defend the scientific framework that I had once critically examined, now seen as a vital bulwark against misinformation and potentially harmful practices.

The interplay between my professional commitment to understanding and representing diverse perspectives and my personal conviction in the validity of scientific knowledge highlighted a fundamental challenge in ethnographic research. Sonia's radicalization and the emotional and intellectual friction it created were emblematic of the broader struggle faced by researchers in politically and emotionally charged environments. The difficulty of maintaining an empathetic and rigorous stance while grappling with opposing beliefs and personal experiences underscored the nuanced balance required in ethnographic work. This tension not only illustrated the complexities of engaging with divergent viewpoints but also revealed the profound impact of personal experience on the researcher's approach to understanding and representation.

The analysis of Sonia's case reveals the complex interplay between personal experience and political ideology, particularly within the context of the far-right's rise during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sonia's story exemplifies how the far-right adeptly harnesses societal anxieties and grievances, positioning itself as a champion of the 'truth' against perceived elitist and technocratic establishments. This manipulation capitalizes on feelings of exclusion and resentment, exploiting these emotions to forge a sense of belonging and agency among its adherents. Sonia's radicalization is not an isolated phenomenon but rather a reflection of a broader social process wherein the far-right's narratives provide an alternative framework for understanding a world in crisis.

The experience of Sonia should be leveraged as a critical lens for understanding the broader dynamics of the far-right's appeal. Sonia's radicalization serves as an illustrative case of how individuals from marginalized or disaffected backgrounds can be drawn into extremist ideologies through processes that blend personal grievance with political messaging. Her story underscores the necessity of examining how far-right movements deploy narratives that resonate with and validate the experiences of those who feel disenfranchised by mainstream political and scientific institutions. This approach not only enriches the ethnographic narrative but also contextualizes Sonia's experiences within a larger social and political framework.

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