‘Fora, Bolsonaro genocida!’: COVID-19 conspiracy theories, neo-nationalism and neoliberal necropolitics in Brazil.
A reply to Kalil et al (2021)

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In both popular culture and academe, renewed interest in conspiracy theories (CTs) has followed in the wake of the recent global rise of far-right extremism. Examples abound: allegations that Hillary Clinton ran a child-trafficking ring from a Washington pizza parlour gained momentum during the 2016 US elections; survivors of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in 2018 have been portrayed as crisis actors hired to advance gun-prohibition policies; QAnon supporters aver that Donald Trump has defended US democracy against the ‘deep state’, namely political and economic elites that supposedly control democratically elected governments from behind the scenes; more recently, voter fraud accusations were raised to counter Trump’s defeat in the 2020 presidential election; and during the coronavirus pandemic, Trump has furthered theories that the virus was created in a laboratory in China to advance its plans of economic domination, while in Brazil Jair Bolsonaro has championed smear campaigns against health authorities and the media, undermining their recommendations for masks and physical distancing.

This overlap between CTs and far-right extremism is not that surprising for at least two reasons. On the one hand, CTs flourish in moments of stark social change because they serve as explanatory devices to make sense of events that threaten existing worldviews (Douglas et al, 2019). On the other, studies seem to suggest that right-wingers (and authoritarian ones at that) are more prone to foster conspiracy thinking due to their need to manage uncertainty which, in turn, provides grounds for extremism (Richey, 2017). Defined as ‘allegations that powerful people and organizations are plotting together in secret to achieve sinister ends through deception of the public’ (Wood and Douglas, 2013:1), CTs offer right-wing authoritarian
populists the discursive and affective grounds for pitting ‘the people’ against a cunning progressive elite that plans to destroy the status quo. The internet has catapulted this dangerous coupling to unprecedented levels (Procházka and Blommaert, 2021). Nowadays, there is no shortage of CTs online, and far-right populists in the US and elsewhere have capitalised on them for political gain.

At this juncture, the publication of Kalil et al’s (2021) article could not be timelier. Zooming in on the conspiracy narratives mobilised by Bolsonaro and his acolytes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, the authors tread fruitful analytical avenues to produce nuanced understandings of right-wing extremists’ modes of action and their deleterious (indeed, lethal!) effects on the population. This reply discusses three of these avenues which I find particularly promising for further interdisciplinary studies of right-wing extremism in Brazil and elsewhere. First, I suggest that Kalil et al’s conclusion that Bolsonaro has succeeded in transforming conspiracy narratives into official state rhetoric could be taken even further if we attend to the performative power of language. Second, responding to Kalil et al’s attention to how Bolsonaro has mobilised fears of communism, globalism and the mainstream media (but not of the virus), I discuss the insidious ways whereby far-right CTs bring to fruition a neo-nationalist worldview (Bergman, 2020) by cross-breeding gendered versions of nativism and populism. Third, I argue that Kalil et al’s article makes available critical elements for investigating how COVID-19 deniers such as Bolsonaro forge CTs into devices to further a neoliberal necropolitical agenda that feeds on (and in turn deepens) the inequalities the pandemic has laid bare.

Since March 2020, the new coronavirus has hit Brazil hard while the Brazilian president has gone to extreme lengths to diminish the severity of the crisis. On 7 January 2021, the day the death toll reached the harrowing number of 200,000, the journalist Matheus Ribeiro (2021) published a list of 200 public statements in which Bolsonaro questioned the need for any protection measures and the seriousness or veracity of the virus itself. Kalil et al discuss many of these statements. As I write this reply, the death toll is even more staggering. In the first four months of 2021, COVID-19 casualties have surpassed 2020’s sum total. I cannot help but recall the countless times I tried to convince (former) friends not to vote for Bolsonaro due to his deranged speeches, only to be met with their go-to excuse: ‘It’s just words.’

Anyone who ever doubted that language, rather than merely representing the world, brings it into being, need look no further than the Brazilian COVID-19 fiasco. Kalil et al are right to point out that ‘Bolsonaro not only amplified these false narratives, but turn[ed] them into state discourse’. Having the alarming numbers mentioned above in mind, I would go even further: the Brazilian president has transmogrified conspiracy narratives into state policies. A case in point is his staunch defence of scientifically unverified treatment protocols such as hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin (doses of which the Ministry of Health bought by the millions). In other words, Bolsonaro uses the state apparatus (and public money) to spread false narratives about the pandemic and stoke them with alternative facts that impact people’s behaviour. The performative power of language plays a significant role in this process.

In their analysis of US politics linguistic anthropologists Janet McIntosh and Norma Mendoza-Denton (2020) point out that Trump’s election provoked a political crisis and a linguistic one. The same can be said of Bolsonaro. Sociolinguist Daniel Silva (2020: 507), for instance, suggests that Bolsonaro’s language use mobilises a ‘reflexive, ordered and laminated method of producing a permanent sentiment of agitation, murk
and discontent in political audiences while a conservative and free market agenda is radicalized in Brazil. Rather than just words, discourse or rhetoric, the conspiracy narratives Kalil et al scrutinise have very material effects on people’s lives. Oliver and Wood (2014) argue that belief in health-related CTs is associated with choosing not to take prevention measures. In Brazil, where a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry has recently been established to investigate government malfeasance during the pandemic, some of the consequences of such narratives are low adherence to mask-wearing and physical distancing, distrust in vaccines and the rising death toll. Not surprisingly, in social media and public demonstrations, the opposition and some factions of the population are now accusing Bolsonaro’s government of genocide and demand him to be ousted with the hashtag #forabolsonarogenocida.

Despite the catastrophe, 30 per cent of the Brazilian population approves of the government, according to recent opinion polls. How is this possible? Kalil et al’s analysis of how CTs instantiate a politics of fear provides a valuable vantage point to understand this paradox. As I argue elsewhere (Borba, 2021), Bolsonaro’s presidential candidacy gained political impetus through mobilising reactive affects such as disgust towards the LGBTQ+ community and fear of the political left. For the 2018 elections, this was carefully orchestrated through conspiracy narratives about the sexualisation (‘gender ideology’) and leftist indoctrination (‘communism’) of children in schools, which attracted the sympathy of evangelical constituencies and the military. Kalil et al’s analysis illustrates that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bolsonaro revamped these false narratives to further a specific kind of nationalism.

While some political leaders have defended scientifically sound prevention measures and used the pandemic as a springboard to renationalisation, as Wodak (2021) argues, COVID-19 deniers such as Bolsonaro have taken advantage of it to instantiate neo-nationalist agendas. Bergman (2020: 38–9) explains that neo-nationalism is a ‘populist and nativist kind of contemporary nationalism, entangled with new kinds of communicative tools and tactics in what has been branded “post-truth” politics’. As Kalil et al demonstrate, Bolsonaro’s conspiracy narratives transformed the Sars-CoV-2 virus into a communist plot only the fittest will survive. For instance, he has described masks as ‘things for fairies’ (coisa de viado) and Brazil as a ‘country of faggots’ (país de maricas) who fear going into the streets because of nothing more than a little virus. Thus the act of not wearing a mask in public is transformed into an index of masculinity. This kind of language mobilises what McIntosh (2020) calls semiotic callousing, a process in which not wearing a mask during the pandemic and then surviving it is seen as a masculine hardening of the nation. Kalil et al’s discussion only glances at the gendered dimensions of the CTs they analyse, but provides insights into how this masculine strengthening of the nation then becomes a nativist trait that must be fostered to face down the ‘Chinese virus’ and, as a result, communism. In such a way, Bolsonaro maintains a perennial state of electoral campaigning that caters to his most faithful voter base to the detriment of healthcare policies that might halt the devastating effects of COVID-19 on the population as a whole. Unlike the spectres of ‘gender ideology’ and communism, the coronavirus has a very material existence.

Transforming COVID-19 CTs into neo-nationalist state policies also taps into Bolsonaro’s feverish attempts to strengthen neoliberalism, as Kalil et al’s analysis painfully demonstrates. The pandemic threw the importance of a strong state into sharper relief due to the need for healthcare provisions and financial aid to the most impoverished factions of the population. Brazil is among the few countries in the
world that still provides universal free-of-charge healthcare to all. Despite decades of underfunding and many shortcomings, the Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS, Unified Health System) has provided vital care to the most vulnerable parts of the population, who cannot afford private insurance, and, as such, has helped forestall an even bigger disaster. Easy prey to health insurance lobbies, the SUS has been under fire by Bolsonaro and his neoliberal accomplices. The pandemic intensified this trend. However, faced with increasing public trust in the SUS, Bolsonaro has been crafting more insidious ways to remove the responsibility of care from the state’s purview. This has been done in narratives that individualise the responsibility of prevention and healthcare, leaving, as Kalil et al point out, ‘individuals abandoned to their own fates’.

In a poverty-ridden country like Brazil, it is not difficult to see how the neoliberal narrative of individual responsibility can easily unspool into necropolitical dynamics in which the state dictates how some people shall die (Mbembe, 2019). Although the virus can infect anyone, its distribution in society is not equal, highlighting inequalities of wealth, education, residence, age, class and race. Even the order to self-isolate is class-based, privileging white-collar workers who can transition relatively easily to online environments while ‘essential’ and service economy workers are forced to venture into crowded public venues and assembly lines. The divide reflects the perennial intertwining of class and race. Research by the Instituto Polis in December 2020 (see Pechim, 2020) shows that COVID-19 kills Black men more frequently than white men and Black women more frequently than white women in Brazil. In other words, although the pandemic concerns everyone, it does not affect everyone equally.

In the neo-nationalist, neoliberal necropolitical state Bolsonaro is crafting with his COVID-19 conspiracy narratives, the pandemic functions to parse the population into those who should survive it to keep the nation strong and those who are not fit for this task. As Kalil and colleagues argue, this is accomplished through Bolsonaro and his government’s pitching themselves ‘as champions of “individual freedom”, placing responsibility on the population’ and advancing ‘the necessity to keep working and save jobs as a way to save lives’. The country’s government has played a weighty role in strengthening fears of unemployment, poverty, famine, inflation, and so on, lest the population’s respect for safety measures disrupt life as usual and threaten the economy. The day I ended writing this reply, Brazil crossed the grievous threshold of 400,000 COVID-19 deaths. Jobs have not been saved as unemployment rates have recently reached record highs: more than 14 million people are out of work. The results of Bolsonaro’s conspiracism are hazardous, and chances are the situation will keep deteriorating even after the pandemic is over, for as long as a genocidal president remains in charge.

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References


