

Introduction

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The world has become a difficult place to study: fragmented, polarised, fast-changing, distrustful and savagely unequal. Ethnography is especially well-placed to grapple with our alienating worlds in turbulent times because it encourages adaptability. Grand universalising theories about cultural practices and socio-political action in different places have long been seen as intellectually untenable with decades of postmodernism, but we do not need to give up painting in big and small strokes on a wide canvas. The study of governance institutions is an entrypoint into researching the relationship between localities and wider worlds (regions, nations, cities) and processes (inequality, state-society relations, violence). Ethnographers excel at articulating how the everyday work of politics manifests resonantly and comparatively across these different levels and within various institutions.

Ethnography encourages us to compile rich accounts out of the plural perspectives of those who are responsible for breathing life into politics. We look at how social actors create, reproduce or disrupt institutional practices and values; meanings through rituals and symbols; and endless configurations of formal and informal power. Ethnographers have to develop subtle research strategies to understand: the diversity within and between different groups and the conflicts this generates; the disputed views and the way they are communicated; the formal and informal rules that limit the possibilities of action of the different actors and groups; the opacity of relations legitimized by hierarchies; the rhythms of work that require individual and group navigation of time and space; the reasons behind institutional efficiency/inefficiency; and also the criteria and values used to consider certain processes and institutions efficient or not. Thus, the inquiries into different bureaucratic-administrative contexts as presented in the articles in this dossier are rooted in the search to deepen our understanding of production itineraries and management of government policies in their material, practical and symbolic dimensions.

This depth and focus on connections in ethnographic research is possible in part because ethnography focuses on everyday practices from close up. Researchers are forced to be innovative – they even change with the social, economic, political and cultural worlds they are studying (Tim Ingold, 2018). But also ethnographers, especially those from the relatively more sparsely populated discipline of anthropology, are always in conversation with other disciplines from (and with) whom we can study a range of theoretical perspectives. We are usually both reflexive and capable of a mix of close-up immersion and detachment, or ‘involved detachment’ as the sociologist Norbert Elias (1987) put it, so ethnography always requires a process of shapeshifting propelled by curiosity. To theorize about people, an ethnographer will be continually navigating difference and resonance: ‘Encountering the foreign commences a dialogic process of (always only ever partial) adaptive transformation that constitutes resonant experience’ (Rosa, 2019: 185).

The articles in this dossier focus on the institutions or social organizations that constitute the centers of power, that is, that have as their ‘mission’ the administrative, economic, legislative, political or legal arbitration of governance. Ethnographers’ research into such governance institutions is usually complex, especially if the intellectual puzzles arise out of entanglements rather than elusive linear causality and the scholars are aspiring to be rigorous, as they are in this dossier. The challenges of doing ethnography in centers of power are an essential feature of the papers presented. The collected works give an overview of obstacles, issues, problems and discoveries derived from the insertion of the anthropologist (or equivalent) into her environment of study in contemporary societies.

We learn about the strategies used by researchers to get the data, develop the analytical frame and create a reflection on these environments as spaces of production of meanings that are always in dispute, but under the appearance of fixity projected by the extended temporality of the institutions. The documents that they study can be viewed as artifacts enrolled in political, social and cultural relations; the barriers to access constitute data that can be framed as expressions of the institutional structure and inflexibility; and the rituals, routines and languages show multiple strategies for social engagement in political processes. The difficulties of doing such research often becomes a core part of the study itself.

The 15 articles are divided in three different spheres of political action or axis for reflection about power: a) **Legislatures**, as the main focus of representation and political discourse in democratic societies; b) **Governance and practices of government**, which comprises the production of the State and its rules and rituals; and c) **Police, violence and territorialities**, focusing on relations between social and political actors and the institutions dedicated to coercion and security.

a) Legislatures

The first part of this dossier comprises four papers that have different approaches to understand the legal, administrative, political and symbolic processes that occur inside legislatures in the last decade. The ethnographical focus on the way that Brazilian representatives, local and national, build their relationships with citizens is closely linked to an intensive study of rituals and practices of collective action in these institutions, all viewed within the context of the rise of the far-right conservatism in the Brazilian political context.

We depart from a local perspective with Campos and Hoyler, in a paper that examines the awarding of commendations in the São Paulo municipal legislature. As the authors have highlighted, the granting of commendations is seen at the interface between politicians and society, constituting “a highly ritualized practice, reflecting its importance in the management of social prestige and in political disputes over official history” (Campos; Hoyler, 2023, in this issue). Analyzing the institutional process with an inside-view and inspiration from the para-site methodology of George Marcus, Campos and Hoyler reflect on the main function of bureaucrats to collect the signatures, a key stage of the practice, and a way to enact the *agreement* as “an

informal set of rules of conduct and institutions that operates in the legislature, producing predictability amid the competition over resources” (Campos; Hoyler, 2023, in this issue).

The second paper shifts the focus to the Brazilian National Congress, more specifically, to the Chamber of Deputies, where Dalla Costa studies the documents produced by the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (PCI) that investigated the formerly named National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) and the National Institute for Colonisation and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) in their attributions of demarcating Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands, respectively. Held between 2015 and 2017, this PCI was established by the *Ruralista* caucus, a group that represents the interests of agribusiness inside Congress. Worried about the conflict between the agenda of agribusiness and the democratization of access to land, the author emphasizes the role of anthropology in demarcation processes of Indigenous and *Quilombola* lands and the questioning of this field of knowledge during the legislative process of the PCI.

Luna also looks inside the Brazilian Congress, exploring the disputes around sexual diversity and abortion in the first two years of Bolsonaro’s government (2019-2020). The election of Jair Bolsonaro as a representative of the extreme far-right showed the process of the construction of conservatism as an important political force in Brazil during the last decade. Using parliamentary discourses and legislative propositions as empirical sources, the paper discusses the Legislature’s dynamics through its conflicts and tensions. The backlash against legal abortion and gender rights conforms to the ‘sexual war’, a dimension of cultural wars expressed by parliamentarians from the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies.

Finally, the article by Aragão presents ethnographic notes on the performances of a group of parliamentarians in the Chamber of Deputies in the years of 2019-2023. Identified with the universe of Bolsonaroism, the actions of these representatives encompass diverse elements from the so-called Brazilian ‘new right’ and conservatism. To approach Bolsonaroism “as a complex set of elements containing different ideas and whose main political reference is the figure of Jair Bolsonaro” (Aragão, 2023, in this issue), the author presents two episodes to situate this empirical universe. The first one shows a complaint submitted to the Parliamentary Ethics and Decorum Council in order to analyze the formation of the Bolsonaroist Bloc. The second situation centers on the debate surrounding a bill about the Commission on Human Rights and Minorities. Both are used to show the way neoconservatists articulate their demands and performances inside the Brazilian Congress.

b) Governance and practices of government

The seven articles that follow in this part of the dossier deal with the management of the state apparatus. In different situations, the authors seek to understand the ‘State’ through its agents, the different interests that move them, their practices and strategies of struggle, and the dispositifs of power that operate in exceptional events or daily routines. Therefore, they research into the processes by which the complex mesh of people and institutions of government is fabricated, and transformed into a univocal, ahistorical, and unchangeable entity: the State (Sharma and Gupta, 2006).

Bóris Maia investigates the preparation of candidates for the public function of tax auditor, which in Brazil requires approval in a highly competitive public selection. Focusing on a classic issue of political science and sociology, the recruitment and training of bureaucratic elites, Maia developed his ethnography on two of the range of courses that promise to better qualify those who aspire to become part of this prestigious and well-paid body of state officials. He did not aim to evaluate the objective knowledge of the different classes, but rather the subjectivity formation of these officials in the training process for entering the formal structure of the State. The author mobilized and articulated the literature on institutions and the State with anthropological studies on learning and cognition. Thus, the reader can apprehend the permeability of state borders (Mitchell, 1991) since bureaucratic subjection and the necessary internalization of a certain ‘civic

culture' precede the rites of institution of the state officials. In addition, the article demonstrates how, in the teacher-student interaction, this 'bureaucratic technician' institutional identity is defined in contrast to other social belongings considered of lesser value, both through hierarchical distinctions from other citizens and the rejection of politicians and politics.

Hernán Garcia moves us from the boundaries between 'State' and 'Society', which Maia's research relativizes, to the triple border between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. He investigated the border control practices between Argentina and Brazil in the Iguazu Border Center (Argentina) during the coronavirus pandemic. He carried out participant observation, informal conversations, structured interviews with state agents from the various institutions responsible for control in Iguazú, as well as a mapping of official documents and press articles about the closure of the border in 2020 and the successive attempts to open it in 2021. Garcia, thus, is inserted in the exercise of the sovereign power of the State (Foucault, 2007), its practices to guarantee territorial limits and the circulation of goods and people through many regulations but, above all, through the permanent possibility of the legitimate use of physical violence. He guides us into understanding how a complex and dynamic world of relationships configures the political-administrative borders of a modern national state.

The Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights during Bolsonaro's far-right government is highlighted in Eliane Reis Brandão's article. By analysing the conservative strategies for managing teenage pregnancy, she presents us with the various technologies of government and moralities used to generate and monitor specific reproductive behaviours. Under the command of Pastor Damares, the Ministry's work erased adolescent sexuality and confined it to the female role in family building. Through an ethnography of a vast corpus of documents (produced by officials and civil society organizations), Brandão demonstrates how it was possible to insert these strategies for controlling the sexuality of young people into a broader political horizon. Between 2019 and 2022 these government health policies were rationalized by two claims: (a) responding to the physical and emotional risk of 'early pregnancy', and (b) a political-moral agenda to combat 'gender ideology', blamed for the weakening of family ties. The article reveals a multiplication of disciplinary artifacts used by the government on young bodies, foreseen and already underway, in the articulation between an anatomo-politics of bodies and a biopolitics of populations. In this way, it allows a specific updating of the dispositif of sexuality, analysed by Foucault in relation to the beginning of the Victorian era, based on the contemporary Brazilian context.

Another government policy enacted while President Bolsonaro was in office is the focus of Ramos et al. Brazilians watched the governance conflicts over sanitation in astonishment, more specifically over ensuring access to water for the most vulnerable populations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the limitations of the context, the authors conducted a virtual ethnography of encounters between different government actors, the private sector, civil organizations, higher education institutions as well as social movements on Internet platforms. They observed that hygiene practices were a consensus in action. This was a contrast to the positions on the efficacy of the vaccine and chloroquine, which witnessed an opposition between, on the one hand, agents and politicians linked to the government (including the President) and, on the other, health experts and civil society organizations. If all agreed on the efficacy of 'washing hands' to prevent the Coronavirus, a controversy was established in the discussion about who would be responsible for resolving the historical deficit of water supply in Brazil which had suddenly become urgent due to the pandemic. In order to understand this political and scientific configuration of conflicts, the authors create a theoretical dialogue influenced by the sociology of science and technology in their explanation between knowledge and power, and between science, politics, and society. In this way, they depict the woven networks in which the different subjects were located and from which they communicated their positions in the ongoing processes and events, managing interests and values in the disputes over the concepts of 'crisis' and 'emergency' and over the responsibility for solving the 'infrastructure problem'.

The interpellations between science and politics are researched by Valeria Ojeda in another context: the construction and implementation of a housing program in an Argentinian province. Through her insertion into the Neighbourhood Improvement Program as a manager, she was in a position to highlight the reflexivity of her experience of being both academic and practitioner during this study. In her ethnographic account, she writes about the tensions that arose out of the necessary reconfiguration of an academic *habitus* (with its specific knowledge, time, and objectives) for another professional *habitus* (managerial) in the design and promotion of a housing policy with social and infrastructure dimensions. The inclusion of ‘participatory methodologies’ in the housing policy development by the new academic actors, gave voice to the ‘target population’ (a term from the institutional language of public policies), allowing them to act as ‘citizens’ in the program. There were many challenges in dealing with disputes between both (a) management, whether social management (social scientists and social workers) and technical management (engineers and bureaucrats), electoral management and public governance, old workers and newcomers, and (b) the coordination of social participation to develop and implement the policy in question. By also considering the different workers involved in the Program, his ethnography presented us with the “bones, flesh and spirit of this monster called the State” (Ojeda, 2023, in this issue).

The exercise of “participatory citizenship” in health governance in a municipality in northeastern Brazil is the axis upon which Andrea Cornwall, Silvia Coelho and Nelson Delgado reflect on the importance of ethnography as a research method for understanding political institutions. The article describes the multidisciplinary research project called Critical Look, the different social insertions of its subjects, and the productivity of their presence and of the ‘ethnographic encounter’ in revealing participatory governance in its various dimensions. By distancing themselves from the normative discussion of what social participation must be, they enable the reader to understand the participatory dynamic as an arena in which agendas are negotiated, demands are presented, redefined, and achieve greater or lesser success depending on the context, social position, political articulation and rhetorical skill of those who speak. Through participant observation, they outline a permanent process of making and remaking democracy by multiple articulations between old and new actors and practices.

The investigation of health governance in northeastern Brazil is the empirical basis for the authors who close the section on governance and government practices. Lázaro et al. acted simultaneously as researchers and fiscal auditors in the field of research on public health units. This dual role was important to understand the intertwining in management and decision-making, between the rules of administration and political and private dynamics. They are, therefore, part of the ethnographies carried out by anthropologists who are embedded within the world under investigation (see Ojeda in this dossier) that has been proliferating in recent decades. They face the challenges specific to this type of insertion (researcher-professional) and are able to ethically and productively explore auditing as an ethnographic field. The authors present bureaucratic and power dynamics and self-interested action in administrative activities, reflecting on the “time of politics” (guided by electoral rituals) and the political and private connections that overlap daily with the normative hierarchy of public management. In this tangle of spaces and times (Palmeira and Heredia, 1994; Teixeira and Chaves, 2004), the authors inquire into subjects’ perspective and dialogue with classic and contemporary authors of anthropology, sociology and history. Thus, they outline how the complexity of the routine of government defy the dichotomies: “politics versus administration; attention versus normative inattention; public versus private; disinterested versus interested; formal versus informal; collective interests versus patrimonialism” (Lázaro et al., 2023, in this issue).

c) Police, violence and territorialities

The four papers on violence and security share in common an interest in theories of ethnographic method and are all in conversation with other disciplines: Rodrigues is concerned with both geography and history; Renoldi compares the inquiry of an anthropology with a police investigation; Dos Santos describes the approach as anthropology and social psychology combined; while Abreu is part anthropologist, part legal scholar and part philosopher. Between them they offer highly innovative approaches for studying worlds full of secrets, coercion and fear.

'Police places' is about policing practices in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro. Rodrigues' starting point is that it is difficult to get access to police, who tend to work in secrecy, and especially in Brazil where accountability from the police to civil society tends to be low. In response to this challenge he finds a mode of inquiry that fits the context beautifully. He goes into police places, or a constellation of social relations that emerge out of interacting with the police, with his interlocutors. By doing walking ethnography with an interlocutor, who acts like a guide into the world of policing, he finds a way to explore this center of power around the police. In his way of accompanying people, whether military police recruits as they prepared for exams or more recently one police trainee (Pablo) in a walk around his neighborhood, he experiments with method. As Pablo becomes his guide of networks, moral codes, shared memories and spaces, we are reminded how anthropologists, or other ethnographers, have uneven relationships with those they study. Unlike the artificial evenness in a researcher's relationship with those filling out a survey, an ethnographer develops temporary, or sometimes even permanent, professional intimacy with a few. Through just one of them, Pablo and his stories, we get to know a huge cast of characters related to the police-connected networks.

Renoldi's anthropology of investigations by the Federal Police in a metropolis of Brazil is about the form of secrets, and how the police look for clues, connections and contradictions, rather than the content of secret findings. The similarities and differences between anthropologist and police officer are illuminating for understanding both processes of inquiry. They have in common that they are interested in the motivation of their informants because the quality of the link between them (researcher and researched), and the information they obtain, will depend on informants' desires, worries and aspirations. On the other hand, the power of the police – to show aggression, use stealth and conceal what they find – is in stark contrast to the constraints put on ethnographers. The difference in epistemologies chime with the relative power of the two groups as well: the police treat the truths they find with certainty, displacing subjects as objects, while anthropologists put factual truth into a peripheral place to make way for creating networks of relationships within which they discover de-centred truths. When they meet the police as interlocutors, there is an inherent conflict because the police see their own role as interrupting illegal action while they view anthropologists as interrupting the process of enforcement. The anthropologist is left in the awkward position of observing what they often deem to be unfair practices but at least being able to report on them in terms of form if not content.

In Dos Santos's exploration of a trauma hospital in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil, we learn about how families are affected by armed conflict and how different victims are treated by medical professionals. Researchers and practitioners have neglected the families of victims and how they experience loss and 'death management', perhaps under-estimating the level of trauma that is provoked by their loss but also the way they are treated. It is not only victims of violence who are expected to be mute and secluded to get good treatment, especially if they are black, as if the violence they have suffered needs to be contained, but this is true for their families too. If the homicide victim is seen as transgressive, then the family will tend to get less access to specialist and timely knowledge about the health of their relative. The author tells us about a specific young man in intensive care, who professionals assumed was involved in crime, when in fact he was shielding his brother from execution. By association their family were treated with brutality. One physician gave an update by saying about their loved-one, "everything that could go wrong has gone wrong with him..."

The intestine is rotten, but the head is preserved” (Dos Santos 2023, in this issue). It was only with time that the medical professionals acquired the capacity to be more considerate and detailed in their reports. It is not only young black male poor men involved in violence whose trauma is overlooked, but even those caught in the cross-fire, and their relatives, who are also guilty until proved innocent if from poor and black communities.

The final article by Abreu paints an expansive ethnographic picture of the relationship between law and politics in Brazil. They constitute each other, while one negates the existence, substance and legitimacy of the other, with law seeing politics as a form of contamination; “they thus dialogue in silence” (Abreu 2023, in this issue). How does this come about? Abreu’s analysis emerges out of ethnographic research in a small town in Bahia state from 1988, northeastern Brazil, then investigating the National Congress in Brasília since 1994, and more recently through the study of law. Out of these three phases of experience, he challenges various hierarchies including the assumption that geographical distance from the capital translates into alienation, as it may be the metropolitan centers that look to the West, and especially its laws, that are out of touch. In the small town, the ethos of helping others and eschewing individualistic self-interest, meant that they saw law as the expression of those in power interfering. In the metropolis, they complain about the population ignoring laws. So the dialogue between the two is one of estrangement. As far as politics is concerned, in Brazil there are two different types of exchange: the longer-term process of gift-giving and debt accumulation and shorter-term bargains, both with a complex and often conflicting range of interests, and it would be more sensible to understand this logic rather than assume that the self-interested individualism of the West should be emulated. Like many of the articles in this dossier, this has wider potentially decolonizing significance. Ethnography can help us see more in the connections and contradictions between fields of study in different parts of the globe.

We might extend Abreu’s resistance to such universalising ‘travelling rationalities’ that circulate with particular energy in the West, as David Mosse (2011) called them within the context of international development, to an appreciation of vernacular methodological approaches to the study of governance institutions. US political science in particular has suffered a retrenchment to taking seriously only narrow quantitative approaches that are perceived to be more reliable and rigorous than emergent, holistically-inclined and multi-disciplinary theories of method (Taylor-Robinson, Crewe and Martin, 2022). Decolonizing the global community of scholars is an urgent challenge not just for the sake of a stronger academia but because democracy benefits from critical and in-depth scrutiny by diverse academics (Crewe, 2021, p. 343). The articles in this dossier demonstrate the power of ethnography as developed by mainly Brazilian anthropologists and the importance of the in-depth scrutiny of the state. We invite the rest of the global community of ethnographers of governance institutions to learn from them.

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