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Social policies with Anthropology? Stories that intersect in an episode of ***Observantropologia***¹

Camilla Iumatti Freitas

Stephanie Sacco

Patricia dos Santos Pinheiro

Anatil Maux

¹ The podcast is available on major streaming platforms including Spotify, Deezer and Apple Podcast. In June 2021 the podcast was renamed as part of our new goals and directions regarding to the podcast mission and design. We seek to deepen the proposal for scientific dissemination of Anthropology from sensitive and controversial topics that we address in our research. You can find us both as *Observantropologia* and *Antropotretas*. To learn more, visit <https://www.observantropologia.com/audiovisuais> or www.antropotretas.com, and follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter @antropotretas. To listen to all episodes since 2020, visit: <https://pod.link/antropotretas>.

Why, after all, would anthropologists venture into sound media like podcasts? Within this universe, what is the best format to inform about research in Anthropology? What topics must an Anthropology podcast cover? These are questions that we, from the Observantropologia Podcast team, asked in early 2020, amidst a pandemic not seen in such proportions for a long time. The podcasts is an initiative of researchers from the Graduate Program in Anthropology at the Federal University of Paraíba (PPGA/UFPB) and, in its first design, presents how senior and junior researchers in the field of Anthropology dealt with the pandemic and the people they were conducting research with. In this sense, it was part of the project of an observatory which the podcast gets its name from.

Meeting remotely, we proposed a sequence of pictures and episodes that brought together professors, students, representatives of social movements and people who participated as research interlocutors. We made two show formats, considering the trajectory and purpose of the episodes: *Antropologia à conta-gotas* [Anthropology with a dropper] and *Pílulas Antropológicas* [Anthropological pills]. The first meets with students who had to rethink their research projects because of the pandemic. In the episodes, students were invited to discuss their research together with special guests, in general interlocutors. We cover topics such as medical usages of cannabis, the heritage politics related to clay art in Northeast Brazil, popular culture, mourning and sickle cell anemia and racism. In the second format, senior professors presented their academic trajectory and the episodes focused on research topics such as health, technology and biosecurity, care, mental health, and public social assistance policies.

Over time, we saw that we could do more, and that's when Pop Up's episodes came out. It was a third show format in which we experiment with sound poetry and other types of sound landscape, as in *Você já amou uma travesti?*². In this episode, we created an ambiance where four transgender artists presented their work in an imaginary theater. In this mixture of themes, formats and characters, we seek to get out of a restricted idea of anthropology and show the importance of the discipline for understanding the world in its complexity. Thus, the first season of *Observantropologia*, which began in May 2020, ended with 16 episodes in December of the same year, with the aim of disseminating what Anthropology is and what we study with it.

2 "Have you ever felt in love with a transvestite?"

The first episode using the *pílulas antropológicas* format was recorded with Professor Pedro Guedes do Nascimento and is called *Covid-19, políticas públicas e cidadania*³. It went on air in June 2020, bringing together two central themes: the *Bolsa Família Program* and its conditionalities, and the emergency aid in face of the covid-19 pandemic. When we recorded it, basic income and emergency aid were in wide debate in Brazil, since many people lost their source of income during the quarantine and needed to guarantee their livelihood. Those who lived on street commerce, gigs, and other informal jobs could not work in a home-office for obvious reasons. However, until emergency aid arrived in the hands of these people, they were invisible to the state, but exposed to the virus. Thus, with each day that passed in the delay of this release and in the absence of an official plan of action to combat the pandemic, social inequalities increased.

More than an important topic for public debate, this episode reminded us of our trajectories as anthropologists, currently located in the Brazilian Northeast. In order to tell how research in Anthropology happens about and with people, in addition to approaching the research that Pedro shared with us, we will fable from our experiences with social policies, whether as researchers or professionals managing social policies. For this, we turn to fiction. Not in the sense of something that is not real, but situations that we experience at different times. Other names, other places. Sometimes bitterly remembered, sometimes they give us shards of hope and inevitably remind us that much remains to be done.

Thinking about social policies, like anthropologists, points to the crossroads of several paths. From public policy management to the university, from research to social movements. And vice-versa, perhaps. Or at the same time. These paths are full of bifurcations, of stones, but also of shadows that relieve the heat, of corners to rest and to breathe. Guided by the conversation with Pedro, we present here some of the crossroads between Anthropology and social policies.

Public policies and citizenship through *Bolsa Família*

Who has never heard a story about some “injustice” regarding those who receive *Bolsa Família*, the cash transfer program that benefits more than 13.9 million Brazilians in situations of social vulnerability? Reports like “I know a person who has children just to receive the benefit!” Or “they earn the *Bolsa Família* and

3 *Covid-19, public policies and citizenship*

buy *cachaça*” or “after *Bolsa Família*, no one wants to work as a maid”, illustrates the atmosphere of suspiciousness surrounding the Program. These are harsh phrases that populate the universe of criticism from those who imagine that the beneficiaries of programs like this would be *unworthy*, not very *hardworking*, *accommodating*, etc.

According to Pedro Nascimento’s research, public policies such as *Bolsa Família* face those judgments all the time. At the beginning of his field research as an anthropologist, it was common to confuse his role as a *researcher* with that of an *inspector* – a role that every public policy manager is committed to fulfilling. After all, there are many judgments about receiving the benefit, whose maximum value can reach BRL \$205.00 in 2020.

Created in 2004, the *Bolsa Família Program* (PBF) has several criteria and obligations for its beneficiaries. According to its guidelines, it is designed as support to families in poverty and extreme poverty throughout the country and aims to provide the means to get out of this situation of vulnerability. Okay, but how does one do it? Where is the information? How does one know if he or she is eligible to receive the benefit? As usual, there is a conflict between the conditions and rules placed on paper by the government, and the reality about how the program is lived in a daily basis. For starters, PBF is a “conditional cash transfer benefit”. It means that there is a calculation made according to the income level of each person and the number of people in the family. The amount each family receives is credited in a bank account, which is usually in the name of the woman responsible for the family.

There are a series of requirements to be fulfilled so that they continue to receive the assistance. These requirements are called “conditionalities”, and imply that children must be properly enrolled and attend school, must present and register regular visits to the health center, and have a vaccination record updated. The conditionalities are focused on children. But it is the engagement of women in the areas of health and education that indicate whether or not the family can receive *Bolsa Família*. In addition, there is a surveillance network in order to check the observance of the conditionalities. One of the things that prompted Pedro to research the Program was to understand how these counterparts affects the lives of the women benefited from the Program, and how they end up regulating their practices so as not to lose the benefit.

Would the PBF be “government aid” or a right? Is its purpose to reinforce the role of women to take care of their children? What idea of care are we talking about? Understanding how daily life is seen and experienced by people is precisely one of the goals of Anthropology, and an infinity of possibilities arises from there. In this tightrope of rules and judgments, anthropological research on social policies looks closely at the points of view of beneficiaries about themselves.

In the PBF, there is the possibility of interrupting the benefit at any time. The fear of losing the resource causes a certain vigilance among the beneficiaries themselves. Conditions are no longer seen as a way to favor access to fundamental health and education rights. In fact, these conditions gradually become a form of control and pressure related to the regulation of practices in the lives of these women if they fail to comply with the *conditionalities*.

In fact, it is crystal clear that the PBF promoted changes in the idea of public policy for the most vulnerable Brazilian population. It promotes engagement in institutions, the search for information, articulation in networks of contacts and the autonomy of families through the ability to manage, at least in part, their economies. In addition, it is worth noting that this public policy supported women to construct their autonomy. However, what was in focus in our conversation with Pedro were the models of surveillance and control around a family ideal, often unrealistic, focused on a model that comprises mother-father-children. Added to this, the promotion of intersectoriality, that is, the articulation of the entire social, educational and health network, often creates obstacles and accentuates inequalities. That’s what our next story is about.

Scene 1–The odyssey in a Municipal Department of Social Assistance

Laura was a young student of Social Sciences. The low income she had to keep studying led her to look for a job, and she ended up getting a position in the city hall of Recife. During the week, she took the bus “Dois Irmãos–Rui Barbosa” and used the two-hour journey in traffic to read the texts that would be discussed during the classes. She liked cinema and politics and was enrolled with a research group on dictatorship and violence. Reading, writing, critical thinking, curiosity... those are some of the practices that anthropologists (or scientists in general) seek to incorporate into their daily lives and help in their training, whether traveling

the roads or taking on administrative positions. All of this was essential to Laura's student life.

As a manager of socio-educational measures in the open environment, Laura worked in institutions for youth conflicting with law. Her role was to support the socio-educational activities for teenagers caught by police authorities who were complying with measures in the regime of freedom, accordingly to the Brazilian law. Her new position was in the department of special social policies. Laura shared a room with the municipal manager of the *Cadastro Único* (CadÚnico, the register for social programs by the Federal Government) and *Bolsa Família*. Bárbara had been in the area for a long time, and it was with her that Laura got to know the bureaucratic procedures of such direct cash transfer programs, such as *Bolsa Família*. She learned about conditionalities, how the program terminations work, the documents required, the implementation of financial resources, among others. Early on, she began to understand the paths taken by the city's population to access such policies, and thus became an anthropologist, while working and putting social policies into practice.

On a Tuesday morning, while working at the city hall, Laura received an unexpected visit from a teenager, somewhat euphoric, who introduced herself as Joana, asking to *ficar limpa* [get clean]. *Ficar limpo* was the code that designated the person who wanted to be treated for addiction to alcohol and other drugs. It was the first time that Laura came across the *via crucis* of intersectoriality. Inspired by anthropological readings, Laura believed that policies should communicate with each other, that is, a social policy must be integrated with policies of education, health, work, employment etc. Furthermore, she believed social policies, which must encourage well-being and a more equitable distribution of resources, are effective when they allow civil society to participate in the entire process, generating a broader and more comprehensive understanding of its effects. And that was what she understood by intersectoral.

The municipality, which prided itself on being a pioneer in the implementation of harm reduction for people who use alcohol and other drugs, did not cover adolescents under 18. At the age of 16, Joana lived in a popular neighborhood in the city of Recife. She was the eldest of five siblings who depended on *Bolsa Família* as an alternative to unemployment. Laura requested to move from her

family house to a shelter for alcohol and other drugs abusers in order to rehab. And it was behind these policies that Laura engaged.

“She is committed to crack, if she has an abstinence crisis, we will not have a prepared team in this unit. She needs to go through a detoxification process”, that’s what the professionals of the only CAPS/AD for teenagers said. CAPS is the acronym for *Psychosocial Care Center*; AD are specific centers for people committed to alcohol and other drugs.

Laura, along with Joana and her father, Sebastião, visited the treatment centers trying to find out where Joana could be welcomed for the necessary time until she was safe to return home. The only vacancy they got was in a psychiatric emergency area in a hospital on the east side of the city, and the reception happened in a violent way. The psychiatrist barely waited for the young woman’s report to start asking the nurse for an injection. “To stay calm”, he affirmed. Joana felt abandoned by Laura, who had given her confidence during the treatment, but who had to leave her hospitalized there. As Laura noticed the injection started to work in Joana’s body, a feeling of helplessness took her completely. Laura still remembers this compulsory-consented hospitalization with sadness.

Joana took part in the treatment for a long time and got sober. Thus, the problem became unemployment. Her family, which depended on *Bolsa Família*, had lost a significant portion of the monthly income. Her twin sisters had not been able to find a place in the day care center and therefore did not study, being unable to obtain the necessary proof for the PBF.

It was time for another conversation that Laura would need to have. What might seem easy became a great challenge, and the partnership with Bárbara was fundamental for the reconnection of Joana’s family to the PBF, which actually depended on the release in the CadÚnico system. And since the youngest kids weren’t enrolled at school, it was impossible to release that family into the system. In other words, the public policy itself – in this case, education – took away the possibility of helping a family in extreme vulnerability. Laura needed six months and countless signed papers, phone calls and e-mails to regularize Joana’s family’s situation. But it was too late – they had already returned to the semi-arid region of Paraíba, where her mother, Fátima, was born.

Scene 2: In the confines of the sertão (semi-arid region), the emergency aid

Eight years have passed, and a lot has changed in Joana's family. As impressive as the rainbow that appears on the long horizon of the sertão and the green that sprouts as soon as the rain shows, some things also flourished from a hard past. Luckily, working with the land was good for the girl, who is now a woman. She married Joab, the son of her mother's cousin, who has also worked in the cooperative since he was a boy with his mother and mother-in-law. They got married at a very young age, and the family was growing: Joana was about to have her second child last time we met.

2020 was a bit of a crazy year for the family. Just like it was for everyone. Until March, everything seemed usual. The three of them lived in the one-room house they had built as soon as they were married, on Joab's mother's land. Life was a little tight, but at least they didn't have to pay rent. Between the work in Joab's fields, Joana's work with the cooperative and the assistance from the PBF, they managed to earn about BRL \$500.00 per month. And that made life tight, because in addition to keeping her small family growing, Joana needed to help her mother and her twin sisters. The girls went to school, but their father, who had long gone to São Paulo, was no longer able to help the family.

In mid-March, everything changed. The whole community started to get worried about the news they heard on the radio and TV: a virus, which came from abroad, was starting to spread through Brazil. Soon the school closed, and the children's noise took over the community. Everyone was more guarded indoors. The bus didn't circulate as much, shops had to close, and everyone was worried about the lack of work.

A short time later came the news about the emergency aid. Nobody wanted to be left out and lose this benefit, imagine having an income of up to BRL \$1200.00 per month in the family! More than twice of what many of them were used to. Everyone started making plans of what they were going to do with that money, but until it arrived, it felt like it was a joke. They had to download a cell phone app to apply and receive the aid. There in the community, to get a cell phone signal, one must have a specific cell phone operator and go under the hose on the corner of the market. Who would be able to apply? Luckily, the only neighbor who

had satellite internet at home helped everyone sign up. It was almost always common to find a group of people at her door. And after what seemed like an eternity, a part of the people received the aid and another part supported themselves, thanks to the contributions that came from the neighborhood. In the community it's like that: what works for one, works for all.

With the extra income, Joana and Joab took the opportunity to renovate their home, the way they had dreamed of. What was just a room, in 4 months, became a house with a living room, a kitchen, a bathroom and two bedrooms. But in the meantime, Sebastião, Joana's father, in São Paulo, was going through hard times. He didn't want to accompany his wife to the countryside and ended up going to the big city. Life had ups and downs since he got there. Sometimes it was possible to send a little help to the family. But in the last few years, he barely had enough to his own daily life.

As soon as the pandemic started, he lost his job. He was a cleaning assistant and worked for an outsourced company that provided services to those large corporate offices in the city. He earned a little more than the minimum wage and paid BRL \$600.00 in rent in a small studio nearby the center of the city. He barely had enough to do the groceries, so sending money to the family, or saving a part of his income was not really possible.

Unemployed, he was pushed to get out of rent and went into a homeless situation. He got the R\$600 emergency aid, but he would only pay the rent with that money. And the rest? Since April, he has spent his days looking for a public hostel to sleep, donations at churches and a job to get out of this situation. When he can't get a place at a hostel, he uses the aid money in some cheap hotel downtown, or for other emergencies. He did not tell his family that he was on the street. Things are never easy there, and he didn't want to worry them about his situation. He was afraid of catching the virus, getting sick and dying alone. But he had hope that this phase would pass, and that life would get back on track, and that he would find a good job and who knows, maybe even return to the Northeast.

At the crossroads of life, stories connect

It was at the beginning of the pandemic that these stories intersected. Laura, that Social Sciences student working at the municipality, was at this point

starting her doctorate at the Federal University of Paraíba. For that, she quit her job and moved to João Pessoa. But the experience at the city hall still reverberated in her thoughts: she remembered the cases, the people who came asking for help, sharing their realities of life, difficulties or sufferings. In addition to a bureaucratic position, Laura turned the office she shared with Bárbara into a space for welcoming and listening. She thought about the people who passed by. How would Joana and so many others be now?

As the emergency aid was intermediated by the public bank *Caixa Econômica Federal*, this system ended up overlapping CadÚnico and the entire network of the social assistance system. It is sad to think that many people who could have been identified and included by the assistance network ended up being left out. Now, if we look at the margins of society, not even the succession of events over time can account for history.

At the university, Laura met Paloma, who soon became an inspirational friend. Paloma is also an anthropologist, coming from another state, Rio Grande do Sul. The two exchanged stories about their memories of home. Their lives had been so different! But when they talked about the pandemic and its consequences, especially for people in greater vulnerability, their experiences ended up becoming similar. Together, they reflected that what the pandemic did was to expose situations that were until then little known, considering a wide range of populations living in precarious condition, and that are outside the assistance network, the registers, the numbers. Either because they were not seen or because they did not perceive themselves as someone who could resort to some policy on the part of the government.

Uncomfortable with the social inequalities they saw in their surroundings, in their research, and in the lives of their colleagues, they decided to take action. They gathered a group of students to carry out a social action project. The group started to accompany several communities through support actions in the fight against the pandemic and ended up becoming an umbrella project of several initiatives, which also included sound media such as the *podcast*. And that's how the last meeting of this crossroads happened: the reunion of Laura and Joana. One of the communities served by the group was precisely the community where Joana lived, in the semi-arid region of Paraíba.

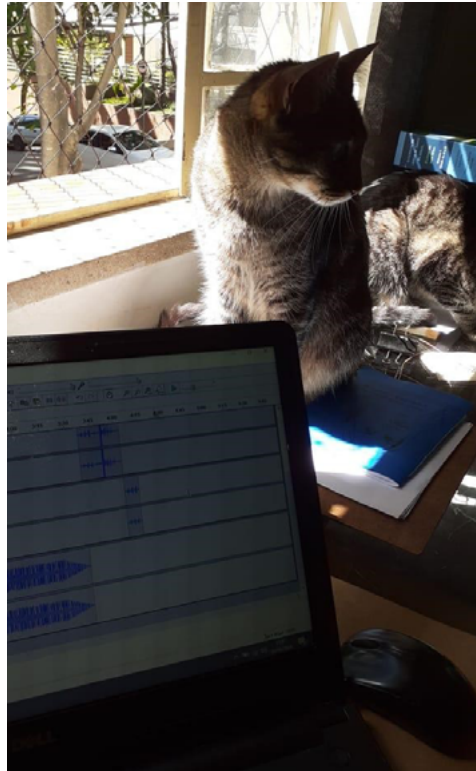
Lives reflected in anthropological research

One of Anthropology's greatest contributions to the research and development of public policies, such as PBF or emergency aid, is that it looks at the lives of people who are influenced by these policies. As a kind of analytical magnifying glass, anthropologists such as Pedro Nascimento seek to know what happens in practice when the aid of these programs promises is received – or not. These researches often turn into thesis and articles, which, although extremely important, end up not coming out of Anthropology itself. With the *Observantropologia* podcast we seek to overcome boundaries and tell the world what we anthropologists do and how our research helps to create other possible worlds. Here, when we talk about public policies, by looking closely at how they affect people's lives, we see more clearly what sustains injustices and the possibilities for social transformation.

The story of Joana and her family brings to life Pedro Nascimento's main reflections in the episode he participated in on our podcast. From the bureaucratic obstacles they suffered for not being able to comply with the conditionalities of PBF for almost a decade in Recife, to the difficulties and consequences of emergency aid in the semi-arid region of Paraíba. The pandemic not only opened up but worsened social inequalities in Brazil. According to Pedro, the race for emergency aid has shown that a third of the country is chronically or often poor, and that many people who did not receive any social assistance from the government began to need it. It also revealed how many Brazils exist in Brazil. The completely different ways in which Joana and her father experienced the pandemic illustrate well those different social realities. While she and her community represent part of those people who did not have access to the internet, but who accessed aid, her father, in São Paulo, ended up on the streets, receiving the same aid.

Bringing these discussions to Anthropology opens space for us to rethink the views that are often crystallized when thinking about social policies for income distribution. Who, after all, are the people who are entitled to this kind of benefit? As well as the research work by Pedro Nascimento (2020), research such as that of Claudia Fonseca (1995, 2004) and Claudia Fonseca and Lúcia Scalco (2015), among others, help us to think about how these rights are (or not) fulfilled in difficult contexts. One risk, for them, is that policies end up being built from generalizations that reduce unique and diverse people and stories.

Our professional experiences, which combine experience in public administration and social organizations with academic practice, inspired the construction of the story of Laura and Joana and her family, as a way of bringing up dramas and paths full of inequalities, including the access to some social policies. On the other hand, some of them, despite having immediate effects, point to the difficulty of thinking about a care network that could insert the most vulnerable population into these rights in a more permanent way. In a different political situation from the one we are experiencing with the freezing of public spending, we could even think of a universal basic income model, as Pedro himself addresses in the episode. He recalls the struggle of Eduardo Suplicy, currently a São Paulo councilor for the Workers' Party, in defense of this universal basic income, which, for him, would be a principle of freedom and dignity for all. Having the basics guaranteed, perhaps Joana's trajectory as a teenager was different. Or her father hadn't had to submit to a job at a third-party cleaning company, with almost no labor rights.



Audios, whiskers, sweat and fur: editing in many voices. Photo by: Thiago Oliveira

The meeting with Laura stands for this place we sometimes occupy. Conducting research about and with other people, with social organizations, from academia to management, or, as in the case of Laura, in the opposite direction, informs us about the tensions that we seek to present in the podcast. Joana, Joab, Fátima, Laura, Sebastião, Bárbara and Paloma are the combination of several people we meet in our daily lives, whether within public institutions or in anthropological readings. They do exist and resist!

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Camilla Iumatti Freitas is an anthropologist, holds a master's degree from the Federal University of Alagoas, and is a doctoral student in Anthropology from the Federal University of Paraíba. She is a researcher in the area of health, body and gender from the perspective of feminist anthropology. E-mail: milla.iumatti@gmail.com .

Stephanie Ferreira Sacco is trained as an internationalist by Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP), a specialist in Sociopsychology from the Fundação Escola de Sociologia e Política de São Paulo (FESP-SP) and a Master's in Anthropology from the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB). She researches new ruralities and the relationship between ecology, health and spirituality, in addition to working as a consultant for social projects. E-mail: stephaniefsacco@gmail.com

Patrícia Pinheiro is a visiting professor at the Federal University of Latin American Integration (Unila). PhD in Social Sciences from the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (CPDA/UFRRJ). She researches the historical trajectory of racism and ways of confronting it, socio-environmental conflicts and policies of recognition of the quilombola population. E-mail: patriciasantspinheiro@gmail.com

Anatil Maux is PhD candidate at Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte, where she works on drugs policies, consumption of psychoactive substances and methodological approaches to deal with sensibilities tensioning the distributive model of right to life. E-mail: anatil@hotmail.com