Social Representations of (Im)migrants in the First Year of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Brazil: A Study of Online News

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Interested in *dialogical* and *modelling* approaches to social representations and communication dynamics, we investigated social representations of (im)migrants constructed in a period and context of intense social vulnerability, the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil (February to December 2020). We explored media communication not simply as the unidirectional transmission of collective beliefs to the Brazilian public, but as social representations co-constructed by citizens and expressed in the comments that they posted on social media. We collected data online and constructed two textual corpora. The first corpus included 134 news articles selected with the search terms 'immigrants' or 'refugees' and 'Covid-19'. The second corpus included 1295 comments written by the readers of the mentioned articles and posted on the newspapers' Facebook pages, which we considered a special interactive space for expressing, sharing,

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and co-constructing social representations. We analyzed the data using the Descending Hierarchical Analysis and Similarity Analysis provided by the software IRaMuTeQ. The results show social dynamics of argumentative polarization about (im)migrants framed in the geo-political Brazilian context at the time of the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. Our case study exemplifies how a context of crisis can reinforce the polarization of existing social representations of (im)migrants in Brazil. We discuss this polarization as an '*echo chamber*' of informational polarization and fake news contributing to misinformation about Covid-19 worldwide, showing how political decisions may increase xenophobia or facilitate social dialogue.

INTRODUCTION

Human mobility is a phenomenon that accompanies human history (Allievi, 2018) and has had a significant increase in past decades, mainly due to political and armed conflicts and the inequality of economic development between different countries. The increased migratory phenomenon has impacted on control policies that have become tougher, based on security in detriment of humanitarian issues (Ramos, 2013; de Rosa et al., 2019). The formation and electoral success of anti-immigrant parties in Europe, the passage of the UK's referendum to leave the European Union, the anti-immigration policy of the Republican President Trump in the US (2016-2020) and President Bolsonaro in Brazil (2019-2022) have led to a decrease in the arrival of (im)migrants in developed and developing countries. These measures have also contributed to an impressive increase of deaths across the migratory routes, in particular the Mediterranean Sea from 2017 to 2020 (UNHCR, January 1 - December 31, 2019; IOM, June 9, 2021).

In 2020, the coronavirus, as a new and unknown 'invisible enemy', replaced the centrality of '(im)migrants' in the media agenda and their prominent place in political discussion (de Rosa & Mannarini, 2020d; 2021a; de Rosa et al., 2021d; de Rosa et al., forthcoming). Indeed, in a highly polarized political debate characterized by the contrast between nationalistic ideologies and the

vision of the world as common house open to the benefits of multi-cultural identities and economic exchanges, (im)migrants are targets of polemical representations as a 'threat to the citizens' security and economy of the host countries' or as a 'potential resource' or as a 'victim' (de Rosa et al., 2020a; b; c; 2021b; Negura et al., 2021).

(Im)migrants are indeed particularly vulnerable groups regarding several factors that determine their human rights to fair life conditions, including education, work, health, and social relations. In most cases, they are exposed to communication impairments, linguistic barriers, difficulties to adapt to the host country, prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination. This is associated to heavy and poorly paid manual that is barely socially recognized, the lack of formal and informal social support, isolation, weak social networks and difficulty to obtain information and access to services, such as healthcare (Macedo, 2017). These factors intensified as the world experienced the Covid-19 pandemic.

According to Uebel (2020), 'scapegoats' are sought by all societies in the event of a crisis. (Im)migrants and refugees are frequently the target of prejudice, fear, and blame. According to Devakumar et al. (2020), the outbreak of diseases creates a sense of threat, fear, anxiety, and an explosion of strong emotions, which, linked to the lack of information, or false information, becomes essential for xenophobia to thrive. Additionally, it is pointed out that the Covid-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected minority groups, such as migrants. Adopting physical distancing (a Covid-19 preventive measure), for example, was not possible for them in many cases, and many undocumented immigrants avoided hospitals out of fear of being identified (Devakumar et al., 2020; de Rosa et al., 2021d).

These difficulties experienced by (im)migrants are pointed out by different media outlets and social networks, which however – depending on their political positioning – represent (im)migrants based on the dichotomy between the images of a 'passive victim' and a 'potential threat' (de Rosa et al., 2020c; de Rosa et al., 2020a; de Rosa et al., 2021b). This dichotomous view is reflected in the reception and integration of immigrants in Brazil, which is frequently considered by the media as a welcoming and hospitable country, despite numerous violations of rights to which immigrants are subjected (Mota, 2019).

The several media in the multi-voiced democratic society are not only an important source of information on social thinking (Moscovici, 1981). They have become a source of informational

polarization and fake news contributing to misinformation (Riva, 2018). This is also the case when individuals and groups construct social representations (SR) of immigration (Watzlawik & Luna, 2017). Especially at a time of social crisis such as a pandemic, communication has a crucial role in how groups will direct their responses to the situation (de Rosa & Mannarini, 2020d, 2021a; de Rosa et al., 2020c; de Rosa et al., 2021c; Justo et al, 2020). Thus, the media, the authorities, and peers on social media become important sources of information (Moscovici, 2000).

Since the 1960's, the scenario of communication has changed, with the digitalization and technological developments enabling millions of people to communicate about almost everything through social media. Among other social objects, science too has become a point of interest (Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998; Castells & Cardoso, 2005). At the same time, controversial issues are difficult to be processed not only by lay people, but also by scientists, in some cases fascinated by *data-driven science*. The new scenario of the *society of algorithms* (MacKenzie, 2019) has also contributed to generate the so called '*dis-information society*' (Marshall, 2017; O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019), fake news phenomena (Riva, 2018) and suspicion about scientists as epistemic authorities in a world of post-truth. Large numbers of people follow science-related pages on social media (Hitlin & Olmestead, 2018) and even more engage in lay conversations on scientific issues (de Rosa & Mannarini, 2020d).

Within this current controversial communicative scenario between information and dis-information, social media have become great sources of dissemination of both news and fake news. Comments by internet users on press articles posted on social media such as Facebook have been considered an important source for debating political questions in Brazil due to the widespread use of this platform and the public character of the posted comments (Mitozo et al., 2017). Facebook and other multichannel social media based on text, images, and videos such as Twitter, Instagram, and Youtube are spaces in which commentators interact, providing insights on argumentation with the potential to influence the comments of others. These social media have been sources of data for studies aimed at investigating widely shared hegemonic SRs, polemical SRs related to controversial issues, and policies related to relevant societal issues such as climate change, immigration, and the Covid-19 pandemic (Jaspal & Nerlich, 2012; de Rosa et al., 2020a; de Rosa et al., 2020b; de Rosa et al., 2020c; de Rosa et al., 2021b; de Rosa et al., 2021e).

Immigration in Brazil

In Brazil, mainly since 2010, with the beginning of the great migratory flows of Haitians, Senegalese, and Venezuelans, what is called the 'migratory crisis' became visible in the political media agenda (Bauman, 2017). A new Migration Law[1] (May 2017) emphasized the rights and obligations of (im)migrants, making the State responsible for preventing violations of their rights and promoting their well-being. Among other provisions, the law guarantees the inviolability of the rights to life, safety, and property, on the same terms as it does for nationals. This new Brazilian Migration law represented a major legal advance on the issue of immigration, shifting its focus from the national security to the migrant's rights and protection. However, in January 2019, President Jair Bolsonaro withdrew Brazil from the United Nations Global Compact, demonstrating his position against the safeguard of the rights of immigrants and contributing to their lack of social protection in the name of the sovereign political orientation (Cá & Mendes, 2020).

Therefore, even though Brazil had policies, bodies and laws for the protection of immigrants and refugees, Bolsonaro's government adopted a position that undermined the rights of these people, which has strengthened the polarization around the issue. There were also complaints of human rights' violations (in particular xenophobia and racism) against the population of immigrants and refugees living in Brazil. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees – UNHCR (2019), around 41% of interviewed refugees in Brazil stated that they have suffered some form of discrimination, mostly for being refugees, based on their ethnic origin and sexual orientation.

Brazil presents several problems of violence (Giacomozzi et al., 2020; Giacomozzi et al., 2021; Vitali et al., 2021) and experiences intense political polarization (Giacomozzi et al., 2022; Giacomozzi et al., 2023). This polarization has affected the public debate about many themes, such as Covid-19 and abortion, among others. Regarding immigration, conservative groups in Brazil oppose the entry of migrants in the country, while activist and liberal groups are favorable and welcoming to immigrants (Bauman, 2017).

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[1] Brazil, Law nº 13.445 May, 24th 2017.

Social representations are a set of concepts, ideas, and explanations about reality, originated in everyday life, which are reflected in the ways in which a society acquires knowledge about the world, including true common-sense theories (Moscovici, 1978). SRs can be *hegemonic*, being consensual or coercive, depending on the level of democratization of each society; *emancipated*, produced by discussions within groups that are in direct contact; and *controversial*, which results in conflict between opposing views (Moscovici, 1988). The study of both online newspapers and their readers' comments on social media is relevant to understand the construction process of polarized SRs of (im)migration.

Social Representations and (im)migration

SRs consist of everyday thinking aimed at *making familiar the un-familiar*. They anchor (new) objects to previous knowledge and convictions and guide our practices in all areas of individual, group and societal interest, from politics to economics, from environment to health, from education to religion etc. SRs also allow us to classify, compare and explain social objects and people *objectifying* them in the interface of imagination and meanings, subject to group rules (Moscovici, 1988).

Among other approaches to SRs theory (structural, socio-dynamic, anthropological, ethnographic, socio-genetic) the modelling (de Rosa, 2013; de Rosa et al., 2018) and the *dialogic approach* (Markova, 2008) contribute to the understanding of the psychosocial aspects involved in the attribution of meanings and communication. The *modelling approach* (de Rosa, 2014) emphasizes the constitutive role of communication as *source, medium and product* in the genesis, development, and negotiation of SRs, in its multiple intertwined levels (interpersonal, inter-group, institutional and media communication) and in its multi-channel ways of expression (verbal, textual, iconic, behavioral, etc.). The attribution of meaning to a certain object is never individual (Camargo et al., 2018), but a collaborative process involving the Ego and the Alter (Moscovici, 1972; Markova, 2008). The communication process also involves conflicts between the Ego and the Other regarding the controversial representations of socially relevant objects (Howarth, 2006) that generate a '*battle of ideas*' (Castro et al., 2016) guiding group identities. These groups

formulate rules, justifications for beliefs and daily practices (Wagner, 1995). Competing groups share antagonistic and irreconcilable views of the same objects (Kus et al., 2013).

In Brazil, representations that circulate among the population portray *immigrants as undesired and potentially dangerous people*, considered many times as *threats to the market* (harming the interests of Brazilian citizens) and public services, associated with the *loss of national identity*, the *spread of diseases and the increase of violence* (Santos et al., 2018; Vilela & Sampaio, 2015). Therefore, large social groups resist the entry of (im)migrants and favor the adoption of greater legal restrictions by government officials. The image of the immigrant as a *threat* reinforces their rejection and contributes to the *xenophobic speech* about immigrants as the cause of national problems (Bortoloto & Santos, 2018). According to Albuquerque Junior (2016), xenophobia includes fear, rejection and aversion to immigrants, involves the lack of trust and prejudice toward foreigners, and is manifested as a refusal of proximity.

A wide research program, articulated in different intertwined lines of 'field' and 'media' studies, and aimed at reconstructing the 'multi-voiced' and 'multi-agent' discourses about (im)migration (de Rosa et al., 2019), provided consistent evidence that the SRs of (im)migrants are highly polarized and polemical SRs as revealed transversally by examining: a. the *institutional and policies driven discourse*, by national and international political Institutions, Humanitarian Associations and NGOs involved in rescue actions, Political leaders and Religious Authorities within different geo-political governmental scenarios in the EU, US, Canada, Brazil and other countries/continents (de Rosa et al., 2021c; de Rosa et al., 2021c); b. the *Media discourse by journalists in on-line press and multi-media broadcast* (de Rosa et al., forthcoming); c. the *social discourse 'for' or 'by' lay people in different social media* (de Rosa et al., 2020c; de Rosa et al., 2020b; de Rosa et al., 2020a; de Rosa et al., 2021b).

The reference to the results of this multi-year extensive research program intends to offer to potential readers further opportunities of deepening our research background related in particular to the *modelling* approach to social representations and communication inspiring this study. Studies that are part of this research program, conducted on Italian and international multi-media sources and multi-channel social networks (including Facebook, but also Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube), show results compatible with the current study, as we will discuss below. Looking at research results on the social representations of immigrants beyond the Brazilian border (or, in

principle, any other country) provides an opportunity to better understand the controversial societal issue of immigration at a global level in the contemporary era of communication. This era is characterized by its echo chamber of the discourse of political leaders, which are based on the view of an interconnected world as a common house for humanity or centered on a sovereign nationalistic ideology. These different views lead respectively to inclusive or exclusionary policies (de Rosa et al., 2021c).

For further insights, in particular regarding the SRs of immigrants in the 1st year of the Covid-19 pandemic, readers may find it interesting to consult the contributions based on research conducted in Italy in 2020 (de Rosa & Mannarini, 2020d, 2021a) and extended in the same year to 10 countries in 5 geo-cultural areas (Europe, North America, Latin America, Asia and Africa) (de Rosa et al., 2021e).

This study

Inspired by the *dialogical* and *modelling* approaches to research on SRs and communication, our study aims to investigate shared and controversial SRs of (im)migrants among the Brazilian public. We explore online media communication not simply as the unidirectional transmission of news from largely diffused online newspapers to the Brazilian public, but also as a space where readers have a voice. The empirical study presented in this article investigates the SRs of (im)migrants through online newspaper's articles and their reader's comments on Facebook in a period of intense social vulnerability in Brazil (February-December 2020).

METHOD

In this section, we present the criteria that oriented the selection of the sources and led to the organization of two data corpora (the first one included online newspapers' article and the second one included their reader's comments on Facebook) and the data analysis strategies.

In order to cover wide multivocal media sources, we selected four online newspapers and one news portal based on the following rationale: the online newspapers were the most diffused in Brazil; they held different political-ideological positions; and a news portal was characterized by

theme specificity. Four online newspapers with national coverage were selected*: O Estado de São Paulo, Folha de São Paulo*, *Carta Capital* and *G1*- a news-portal from the *O Globo* group. We also selected a news-portal devoted to the theme of migration: *MigraMundo*. As Taschner (1992) states, *O Estado de São Paulo*, founded in 1885, is predominantly conservative and represented the rural elites when it was founded. On the other hand, *Folha de São Paulo,* founded by a group of journalists in 1921, had an opposing stance, being predominantly liberal. Carta Capital has a clearly left-wing political position, while G1 and Migramundo do not have a declared position. Although there are controversies on the political orientation of these outlets, we shall assume the characterization made above for our analysis.

We justify the *choice of the time period* (February-December, 2020) as follows. This period, the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, was a crucial historical period in which politicians, driven by different ideological visions, needed to take a position in relation to public health policies; experts in various disciplines gradually became 'pop stars', guiding, supporting, or even legitimizing political decisions; citizens had to navigate the polyphony of often discordant voices, while they were called upon to substantially modify their daily life to prevent the spread of the contagion (de Rosa & Mannarini, 2020d, 2021a; de Rosa et al., 2021e).

To select the news articles, we used the following search terms: 'Immigrants' and 'pandemic', 'refugees' and 'Covid', 'refugees' and 'pandemic', 'immigrants' and 'Covid', 'immigrants' and 'Covid-19'. Searching jointly 'immigrant' or 'refugee' *and* 'pandemic' - rather than 'immigrant' *or* 'pandemic' - was justified by the motivation to look for the explicit co-occurrence of the two terms in the news articles' discourse. This co-occurrence contributes to generate or express SRs of the two objects – that we hypothesized to be interrelated as *sources of fear* for some social groups. This hypothesis was driven by the theoretical insights supported by empirical studies about the relations between SRs and identity, leading to *othering* processes (de Rosa & Mannarini, 2020d).

We found 2,083 news articles. After excluding duplicated articles and applying the eligibility criteria (news in Brazilian Portuguese that mentioned the issue of immigration in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and encompassed both national and international facts), 134 articles were selected to compose the 1st *corpus*. Among them, 63 articles were from *MigraMundo,*

28 from *Folha de São Paulo*, 25 from *O Estado de São Paulo*, 12 from *Carta Capital* and 4 from *G1*.

The second corpus included 1,295 comments made by the article's readers on Facebook pages and/or the newspaper's news portal (space right below the article made available by the news outlets for the readers' comments). These are special interactive spaces for expressing, sharing, and co-constructing SRs. Among the comments, those that notably evaded the theme were excluded.

We analyzed the two corpora using the IRaMuTeQ software (Ratinaud & Marchand, 2012). The illustrative variables[2] included in the analysis were:

- for the 1st corpus (news articles): a. the *newspaper*; b. the *national Brazilian context or international context* related to the news on migration; c. the *time-period* in which the texts were published;
- for the 2nd corpus (reader's comments on the selected news): a. the *Newspaper;* b. the *gender of the reader* (the only identifiable variable regarding the readers).

For the purpose of data analysis, the content of the text included in the 1st *corpus* (news articles) was submitted to a *descending hierarchical analysis (DHA)*, and the 2nd *corpus* (readers' comments) was submitted to a *similarity analysi*s through IRaMuTeQ software.

The choice of these two methods for data analysis was justified by the nature of our two data corpora. For the textual material from the traditional media – which were journalistic texts, generally long, and with a dense content - we decided to use *descending hierarchical analysis - DHA* through the IRaMuTeQ software.[3] Regarding the analysis of the Facebook-users' comments, despite their large number, they did not allow for a good DHA since they were short sentences in general. According to Camargo (2020), to have an analysis considered representative of the textual corpus, it is necessary to have a retention above 75% of the material in the DHA analysis, which was not the case of this second corpus. Therefore, we decided to use the similitude tree to analyze

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[2] The 'illustrative' variables (also called descriptive or metadata) are those selected by the researcher and inserted in the research design to verify their hypothesized relationship with the 'active' variables object of analysis constituting the corpus of textual sources, which organize the results according to the procedural strategies chosen by the researcher: e.g., *descending hierarchical analysis (DHA), similarity analysis, specificity analysis*, etc.

[3] IRaMuTeQ is a free piece of software that performs different forms of statistical analysis on textual corpora (Ratinaud, 2009). It is used in the social sciences and considered a reliable tool in qualitative-quantitative content analysis, employing, among other functions, a descending hierarchical analysis of classification (Sbalchiero, 2018).

this material. This type of analysis is based on graph theory and investigates the relationships between words (Camargo, 2020).
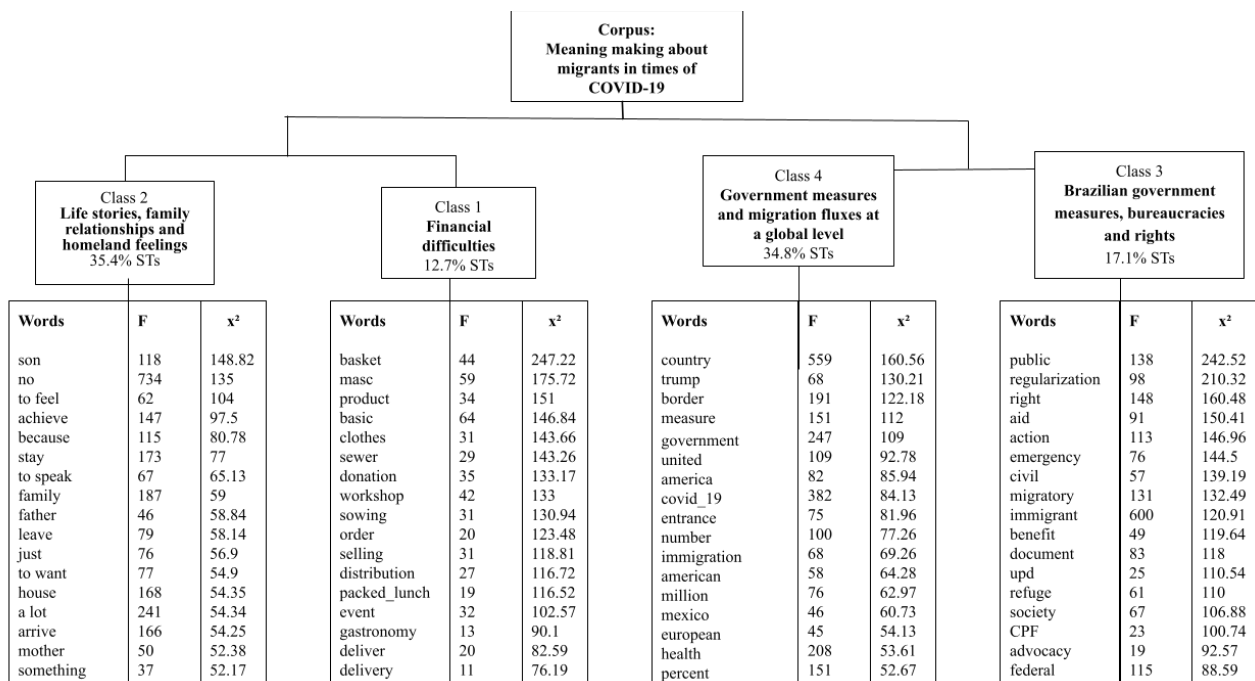
RESULTS

First analysis by *DHA* of the 1st corpus: News articles

In the DHA of the first *corpus*, 3,161 text segments (ST) were analyzed. The DHA retained 98.75% of the total number of ST and generated four classes of ST. Figure 1 shows the typical vocabulary of each one of the classes, the frequency of each word and their association (chi-square) with their respective class. We formulated the titles of the classes based on their dominant content. The description of the findings includes the chi-square values for the association of the illustrative variables (such as the news outlet) with the generated classes.

Figure 1.

Results of the DHA. Typical vocabulary of the generated classes of segments of text. Frequency of the words and association (chi-square) of each word to their class.

Corpus:
Meaning making about migrants in times of COVID-19

Class 2
Life stories, family relationships and homeland feelings
35.4% STs

Words	F	x^2
son	118	148.82
no	734	135
to feel	62	104
achieve	147	97.5
because	115	80.78
stay	173	77
to speak	67	65.13
family	187	59
father	46	58.84
leave	79	58.14
just	76	56.9
to want	77	54.9
house	168	54.35
a lot	241	54.34
arrive	166	54.25
mother	50	52.38
something	37	52.17

Class 1
Financial difficulties
12.7% STs

Words	F	x^2
basket	44	247.22
masc	59	175.72
product	34	151
basic	64	146.84
clothes	31	143.66
sewer	29	143.26
donation	35	133.17
workshop	42	133
sowing	31	130.94
order	20	123.48
selling	31	118.81
distribution	27	116.72
packed_lunch	19	116.52
event	32	102.57
gastronomy	13	90.1
deliver	20	82.59
delivery	11	76.19

Class 4
Government measures and migration fluxes at a global level
34.8% STs

Words	F	x^2
country	559	160.56
trump	68	130.21
border	191	122.18
measure	151	112
government	247	109
united	109	92.78
america	82	85.94
covid_19	382	84.13
entrance	75	81.96
number	100	77.26
immigration	68	69.26
american	58	64.28
million	76	62.97
mexico	46	60.73
european	45	54.13
health	208	53.61
percent	151	52.67

Class 3
Brazilian government measures, bureaucracies and rights
17.1% STs

Words	F	x^2
public	138	242.52
regularization	98	210.32
right	148	160.48
aid	91	150.41
action	113	146.96
emergency	76	144.5
civil	57	139.19
migratory	131	132.49
immigrant	600	120.91
benefit	49	119.64
document	83	118
upd	25	110.54
refuge	61	110
society	67	106.88
CPF	23	100.74
advocacy	19	92.57
federal	115	88.59

The *corpus* expressed several levels of analysis: societal, inter-group, interpersonal and intra-individual (Doise, 1993). The first sub-corpus, comprising classes 1 and 2, refers to the individual micro-social universe based on the life stories of immigrants, Covid-19 related financial difficulties, family relationships, and feelings. The second sub-corpus, encompassing classes 3 and 4, referred to the macro-social universe, with topics such as governmental measures at a national and international level, migratory flows, bureaucracy, and immigrants' rights.

Class 1, which we named '*Financial difficulties*', represented 12.7% of the text segments, predominantly referring to the national context ($x^2 = 102,35$) during April ($x^2 = 23,35$) and July ($x^2 = 55,03$) 2020 in G1 news portal ($x^2 = 96,79$) (news outlet with no declared political orientation). The content of this class is objectified mainly in financial difficulties arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. The class mentions charity donations and job insecurity, as illustrated by the following excerpt, which considers the (im)immigrant's condition as a vulnerable person exposed to unfavorable economic conditions:

> "Famous restaurants in São Paulo sell typical Venezuelan dishes to raise funds for immigrant inclusion NGOs. Half of the profit from the sale of arepas, a traditional Venezuelan recipe, will be donated to an NGO that promotes the socioeconomic inclusion of refugees and immigrants in SP" (G1, 01/09/2021).

Class 2, which we named '*Life stories, family relationships and homeland feelings*', represented 35.4% of the text segments. News published by *Folha de São Paulo* ($x^2 = 219,94$) (news outlet with liberal ideological orientation) referred to immigrants' narratives and their feelings towards the *host* and *origin countries* during the pandemic. The content of this class mainly addressed their family and social relationships, in an empathetic fashion, and evoked their fear of dying outside their homeland. The following extract is an example of this type of content:

> "If I'm going to die, may it be in my country, every time I hear this, I remember how far I am from home and this makes me feel somewhat helpless, Covid-19 does not distinguish social class, sex, race" (*Folha de São Paulo*, 12/12/2020).

Class 3, named '*Brazilian governmental measures, bureaucracy and rights*', represented 17.1% of the text segments. News published by *MigraMundo* ($x^2 = 353,26$) mainly addressed the

Brazilian government's measures concerning immigration and the pandemic, and the related bureaucracy and rights. The following excerpts are illustrative of the newspaper *MigraMundo* - sensitive to the rights of immigrants and the actions needed to defend them against bureaucratic barriers - as well as the attention dedicated to the fragility of undocumented (im)migrants by *Folha de São Paulo* with its liberal inclusive orientation:

> "The Federal Court of Acre granted an injunction this Wednesday (19) in favor of the Public Civil Action against the deportation and repatriation by Brazil of vulnerable immigrants who arrived in the country on foot, through the border with Peru." (MigraMundo, 08/19/2020)

> "The pandemic exposes the fragility of undocumented immigrants and creates pressure to regularize undocumented foreigners who are left without access to government aid and depend on organizations to survive" (*Folha de São Paulo,* 09/03/2020).

Class 4, which we named '*Governmental measures and migratory flows at a global level,*' represented 34.8% of the text segments. It refers predominantly to news published by O Estado de São Paulo (x^2 = 250,97) and *Carta Capital* (x^2 = 29,5), addressing international government measures *(x^2 = 356,44)*. These news outlets have different political orientations. *O Estado de São Paulo* is the voice of the conservative ideological position and rural elites and *Carta Capital* expresses a left-wing political orientation. They address the issues of international government measures, migratory flows, and barriers during the pandemic, from different perspectives. O *Estado de São Paulo* conveys information in a more neutral way. On the other hand, Carta Capital positioned itself in favor of governmental measures welcoming of migratory flows. The following excerpts exemplify the polarized views of the two online newspapers supporting policies oriented to closed versus open borders to *migratory flows:*

> "President Donald Trump has discreetly used the Covid-19 pandemic to advance his political agenda, yesterday he fulfilled another of his old wishes and closed the border with Mexico for non-essential travel, maintaining trade but barring the transit of people" (*O Estado de São Paulo*, 03/21/2020).

> "The Colombian government announced this Monday (23) that it will exclude Venezuelans in an irregular situation from the mass vaccination process against covid19,

which corresponds to 55% of the 1.7 million citizens of that nationality in the country, endangering the lives of more than half a million people." (Carta Capital, 12/23/2020)

Analyzing the dendrogram (Figure 1) and the content obtained in the analysis of this first corpus, we verified that the SRs of (im)migration and (im)immigrants constructed and expressed by Brazilian newspapers during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic included micro and macro-social issues. These issues referred to the narratives embedded into the life stories of immigrants, the migratory process, family and social relationships, worldwide experiences of the pandemic, financial and bureaucratic difficulties, rights' violations, national and international governmental measures affecting the lives of immigrants, and further inequalities experienced by them as more vulnerable human beings.

Similarity Analysis of the 2nd corpus: the readers' comments on the selected news

We analyzed the second *corpus* with IRaMuTeQ similarity analysis. The corpus was composed by the readers' comments on the news articles selected for the first *corpus,* although not all articles originated comments, and some articles had more comments than others. Similarity analysis allows for the verification of the connection of textual elements (co-occurrence of words). It allows for the visualization of the organization of the representations based on the strength with which the elements connect to each other (Moliner, 1994).

The results, illustrated in a *similarity tree* (Figure 2), revealed the tree of connections, in which words with bigger letters indicate greater frequency and the edges, lines of different thickness, point to co-occurrences among the elements presented. The numbers superposed on the lines indicate the number of times the words linked by them were employed together.
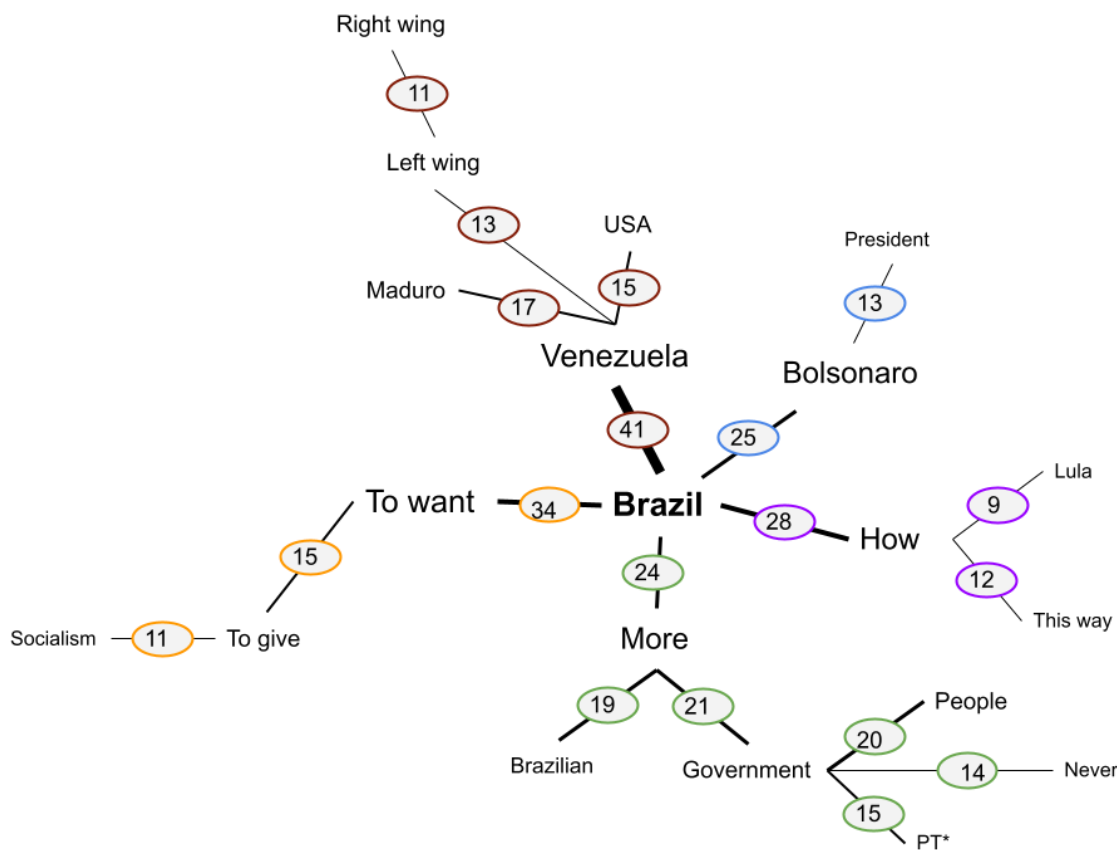
Figure 2.

Results of the Similarity Analysis of the 2ⁿᵈ corpus: reader's comments on the selected news

The word 'Brazil' stands out in the similarity tree as the main element of the comments, with a strong connection with the word 'Venezuela', and its background chain of words 'Maduro', 'USA', and the two political poles of 'left wing' and 'right wing'; there is a weaker correlation on the left side to the chain of words 'to want,' 'to give', and 'socialism'; on the right side, to the chain 'How', 'this way', 'Lula', which is distinct from the chain 'Bolsonaro'-'President'; and a bottom chain referring to 'More', 'Brazilian', 'Government', 'People', 'PT' (*Workers' Party*), and 'Never'. We can observe that not only the central organizing elements, but also most of the elements comprising the tree express the political polarization expressed in the readers' comments. The axis in which the word 'Venezuela' stands out refers to the readers' comments that gravitated around the

comparison of Brazil to Venezuela. Readers expressed the fear that Brazil would become similar to its neighbor, where the government is perceived as a left-wing dictatorship. According to the social representation shared in some readers' comments, if Brazil had not elected a right-wing President in 2018, it could have quickly become another Venezuela. On the other hand, other readers compared Brazil's current economic situation to the neighboring country, as demonstrated in the following statement:

> "They [right-wing voters] were afraid of Brazil becoming Venezuela. We are closer than ever to this happening with the current government (2020). Unfortunately." (Comment made by a female reader of news published in *O Estado de São Paulo)*

Other readers stated that the situation experienced by Venezuela is closely related to the trade embargoes imposed by the United States. Other comments referred to feelings of hatred towards the neighboring nation and immigrants who come to Brazil.

The axis associated with the words 'want,' 'how,' and 'more' refer to a political domain, based on connections to the words 'PT' (*Workers' Party* – one of the main left-wing parties in Brazil), 'Lula'(since 1 January 2023, president of Brazil for the third time, member of the Workers' Party and perceived as a left-wing politician), 'government', 'socialist', and others. The comments associated with these words are polarized. Some readers praise the years of government led by the PT, arguing about economic and social aspects while others criticize the years of PT government (which occurred right before Bolsonaro's mandate), raising arguments mainly related to corruption. The following comment is an example of criticism raised against the (left-wing) PT:

> "You can't argue with someone who has PT as the only response option on their cell phone keyboard. We've reached this point as a nation because people here are very ignorant and easily manipulated" (comment made by a female reader of news published by *O Estado de São Paulo*).

In the axis organized by the words 'Brazil' and 'Bolsonaro', we identified political polarization and criticism towards the Bolsonaro government. The following comment is an example:

"Who in their right mind will want to come to Brazil? What needs to be done is preventing the powerful militia boss Bolsonaro from continuing to preside over Brazil" (comment made by a male reader of news published by *Carta Capital*).

We verified that most of the comments reveal political polarization between people who support President Bolsonaro, praising his measures regarding the pandemic and criticizing the entry of immigrants into the country; and people who criticize his government, the measures adopted regarding the Covid-19 pandemic and immigration. A great number of comments do not develop arguments and explanations about immigration, simply pointing to their political position. The centrality of political issues can also be observed in the frequency of words, since Bolsonaro (136); PT - Workers' Party (100) and left (74) were mentioned more frequently than the word immigrant (that occurred 36 times).

Some comments were xenophobic, alleging that the entry of immigrants harms the Brazilian economy, public policies, and the job market. This is an example:

"I really do feel sorry for the situation of these people, and I understand they left their countries due to precarious living conditions. But the fact is that Brazil is unable to welcome more people in need, since most of our own people are people in need of basic assistance, the minimum to survive. Look at the rich, developed countries: there is an extremely rigorous control of whoever enters, because they already know that if everyone and anyone is accepted, the country's structure won't keep up" (comment made by male reader of news published by *O Estado de São Paulo*).

On the other hand, some readers considered the difficulties faced by immigrants and expressed compassion. This polarization of the social representations that circulate among Brazilians can be exemplified in the following comment:

"So much prejudice towards our immigrant brothers. Do not forget that our Brazilian brothers also went in search of other countries to have a more dignified life. Immigration has been part of humanity's daily life for centuries, we don't have the right to judge our foreign brothers, sending them away, kicking them out. No one is here to take anyone's job, especially because what we have here is underemployment. Apparently, Covid-19 has

taught us nothing about solidarity" (comment made by a male reader of news published by *Folha de São Paulo*).

We identified SRs permeated by xenophobic beliefs and fake news and transmitted through hate speeches, directly attributing the entry of Covid-19 in Brazil to immigrants. The following extracts express this kind of representation:

"There are 2 States in Brazil with the highest number of Covid-19 cases, which are the States that took in more immigrants than other states (RJ and SP). It seems that mass immigration has a direct relationship with Covid-19" (comment made by a male reader of news published by Folha de São Paulo).

"If the immigrant has a job, or at least money to support himself, let them in. If not, don't. Anyone comes in, do whatever they want. They often steal, kill and traffic. Those who do not do this think the government is obliged to support them" (comment made by a female reader of news published by *O Estado de São Paulo*).

The analysis of journalistic texts was useful to understand many aspects involved in the problematic situations of immigrants during the pandemic. The analysis of the readers' comments on the same news clearly showed the political polarization around the theme. While some readers pointed to the need to welcome migrants, others were explicit in their support for the social exclusion policy practiced by Bolsonaro, using xenophobic arguments and blaming this outgroup for the entry of Covid-19 in the country.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to analyze how Brazilian newspapers and news-portal described the phenomenon of immigration in Brazil in the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. It also aimed to analyze the comments of the readers of these news outlets. We aimed to understand how the arguments developed by the newspapers could stimulate the construction of SRs on immigration among the readers through their social network comments.

We observed that the analyzed news articles presented aspects related both to the intra-individual universe of immigrants, as well as to the interpersonal, intergroup, and societal levels of analysis (Doise, 1993). They referred to the inequalities and difficulties faced by immigrants in

Brazil and worldwide during the Covid-19 pandemic. They described (im)migrants as people often forced to come to Brazil because it was their only option for survival; or they were enduring financial difficulties during the pandemic, with precarious jobs, many times analogous to slavery; or they had frequently survived due to the help of volunteers and donations; or they had fought for access to rights, such as the emergency aid provided by governments, among other factors. The news articles, in general, presented (im)migrants as people who have been in an even more vulnerable situation during the pandemic, avoiding the reinforcement of negative stereotypes attributed to them.

The representation of (im)migrants free from the xenophobic stigmas often attributed to them was prevalent in our selected journalistic Brazilian sources. However, these sources often constructed representations that underlined the problematic aspects of migratory flows to the host country and the need to resort to their limitation. The presence of the *black-and-white* polarization of the representation of immigration as a *problem* and *threat* or as a *resource* for the host country was less strong in the news articles analyzed in the current study if compared to the results of empirical researches conducted in other countries with journalistic and multimedia sources (Montali et al., 2013; Mazzara et al., 2020; de Rosa et al., forthcoming). The polarization of the news articles was also less strong than the one that characterized the readers' comments in this study, which expressed widespread feelings in Brazilian society. The representations constructed by the news articles, however, were not *univocal* and totally '*hegemonic*', but were linked to the ideological-political positioning of the selected news outlets.

In this regard, it is interesting that some of the classes detected by the DHA were associated with specific newspapers, leading to interpretations based on the newspapers' political positioning. While *G1* discussed the financial difficulties faced by (im)migrants, the liberal *Folha de São Paulo* narrated life stories and family relationships of this group, presenting (im)migrants as vulnerable people forced out of their native country and affected by the fear of dying from Covid-19 far away from their country and family, rather than as anonymous invaders. *MigraMundo*, a news-portal dedicated specifically to migration, criticized the bureaucracy of the Brazilian government, especially during the pandemic period. The conservative newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*

addressed the (im)migration issue at a global level, turning its attention to the anti-immigrant policies adopted in the US by President Trump and could perhaps serve as his *echo chamber[4]*.

Devakumar et al. (2020) and FIOCRUZ (2020) point out that the Covid-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected minority groups, such as (im)migrants, who suffer with structural violence. Physical distancing as a Covid-19 preventive measure was often not possible for individuals from these groups, which suffer from precarious housing or even the lack of housing. Many undocumented migrants avoid hospitals out of fear of being identified, becoming '*invisible*' (Devakumar et al., 2020; de Rosa et al., 2021d).

Some of the analyzed news articles, however, highlighted information on governmental decisions related to borders in an apparently 'neutral' way, but, in fact, these articles contributed to the construction of negative attitudes about mobility issues during the pandemic. In this sense, Rodrigues et al. (2020) state that the closure of the Brazilian-Venezuela border at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic was officially presented as motivated by 'sanitary measures', at a time when there were only a few 'imported' cases, and Brazil's air borders with Europe were kept open, even with tens of thousands of cases confirmed in the European continent. Moreover, Brazilian government officials did not request information or were concerned about the well-being of immigrants who were in Brazil (Pêgo et al., 2020). In this sense, Marinucci (2021) points out that the pandemic served as an ulterior motive to legitimize securitization policies and the suspension of human rights, such as the right to refuge. Additionally, arguments for closing borders, such as: '*Potential epidemiological risk*' act as immunization policies against otherness and strengthen xenophobia. Regarding this issue, it is possible to notice that some news articles, mainly those related to governmental measures of the former US President Trump, carry considerations on the closure of Mexican-American borders, with the pandemic as an 'excuse'.

Moscovici and Hewstone (1983) identified three sub-processes associated with the objectification process in the construction of SRs, namely: *personification* of knowledge, *figuration* and *ontologization*. Personification of knowledge links the abstractness of SRs, identity and socio-psychological action to a person or group, providing an object with a more concrete

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[4] The metaphor of the echo chamber is to be understood as a communicative dynamics in which pre-existing beliefs are repeated and reinforced like reverberations in an acoustic echo chamber, depending on the political and worldview affinity. In this case the ideas of president Trump about (im)migration.

existence through this association. It seems pertinent, therefore, to state that Donald Trump personifies anti-immigration actions and policies in the world, and Bolsonaro took this position in the Brazilian context, due to his shared political world view. The point of view expressed by political leaders is of utter importance because it can shape representational systems to create social realities that meet their interests, or their world views. This is because SR do not spontaneously arise from a neutral process of contemplation. People see the world in a particular way, based on constant exposure to certain points of view, validated by their groups of belonging. Therefore, a political leader that promotes discrimination against certain social groups can stimulate xenophobia and even violence among groups.

Although most of the news articles selected for our study did not predominantly stigmatize immigrants, the comments made by internet users have shown polarization between those in favor of welcoming, integrating, and aiding immigrants in Brazil, and those who oppose their entry into the country and harass them. Social representations involve common knowledge, placing individuals as producers of meanings that create their social reality.

In line with a wide literature, the results of our study confirm controversial SRs, with some individuals portraying immigrants as a vulnerable group (as victims) as opposed to those portraying them as dangerous, criminal and 'contaminant' invaders in the scenario of the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, there are inclusive or exclusive positions driven by polarized views about immigrants anchored in different world views (de Rosa et al., 2020b; Rozendo et al., 2022). Furthermore, data and news were frequently used to support the different positions (de Rosa et al., 2021b). The analysis of documents related to the institutional and policies-driven discourse within different geo-political governmental scenarios detected the relevance of the *'(de)personification'* and *'(un)naming'* of (im)migrants as an outgroup, offering a new reading key of the 'objectification' and 'anchoring' processes that construct SRs. Confirming the results of previous research, this study has also shown polarization between '*naming*' and '*personification*'- anchored to narratives of the human condition of migrants in the action-driven discourse produced by pro-migrants NGOs - compared to the description of '*un-named*' and '*de-personified*' migrants which makes them invisible and is present even in the institutional policy-driven documents. Between these two poles, an 'economic-driven representation' of immigrants or political refugees contextualizes the

discourse of political leaders with different connotations depending on their ideological orientations (de Rosa et al., 2021d).

The formation of opinions on social media becomes susceptible to populist interests and leaders, who seek the consensus of the masses through simplistic interpretations of reality. Additionally, disputes between groups tend to promote superficial debates on complex themes, based on binary oppositions with moral connotations, in which everyone is the judge/defendant of others' thoughts (Machado and Miskolci, 2019).

Several of the readers' comments analyzed in this study were pre-packaged ingroup responses addressed to individuals perceived as out-group members who wrote the previous comment. These dialogs and interactions around the news articles had the article as a starting input, as well as the opinions that the outlet itself exposed. Thus, interactions with the news are fundamental, as it allows the online news' readers to have direct reciprocity when expressing their SRs (Rubi & Liloff, 2020). The social media allow these exchanges, contribute to the participation of subjects in debates and in the continual process of negotiating meanings, influencing beliefs, affections, representations, and practices (de Rosa et al., 2020b).

Overall, we verified that the interactions of Brazilian internet users showed clear polarization. Many individuals used the theme of (im)migration to discuss political positions and attack members of opposing (out)groups. Opinions based on disinformation and fake news (news that propagate untrue content) were also observed. In this sense, Falcão and Souza (2021) state that the multiplicity of sources of information contributes to the relativization of truth, with disinformation compromising the citizens' capacity to make well-informed decisions, leading everyone to believe whatever is more convenient for them. Furthermore, in their research, Recuero, Soares and Zago (2021) found that the presence of hyper partisans seems to be associated with the circulation of disinformation. Thus, a partisan purpose may be identified in the spreading of fake information that also contributes to the construction of negative attitudes and social representations on different issues, usually controversial, as is the case of (im)migrants.

Research has shown strongly polarized speeches on immigration in several countries, showing that this is, in fact, a field of controversial SRs (Moscovici, 1988). Such speeches are usually based on opposing political views, where media and right-wing political leaders have shown to be resistant to (im)migration, while left-wing media outlets and leaders have an open and

welcoming speech regarding (im)migrants (de Rosa & Mannarini, 2020d, 2021a; de Rosa et al., 2020c; de Rosa et al., 2020b; de Rosa et al. 2020a; de Rosa et al., 2021e; de Rosa et al., 2021c; de Rosa et al., 2021b).

According to Uebel (2020), in the face of crises, all societies seek a 'scapegoat'. Unfortunately, migrants (and refugees) are frequently the focus of prejudice and fear that strengthen the idea that migrants spread diseases. Habibi et al. (2020) found that a great diversity of fake news contributed to the dissemination of disinformation about Covid-19, and political decisions led to xenophobia worldwide. Thus, Marinucci (2021) warns that circumstantial discriminations (related to the pandemic) were added to structural prejudice.

Furthermore, consonant to other researches the contempt for the different views that many internet users expressed was notable. Some individuals defended closing borders, deportations and even physical aggression and extermination (Kohatsu, Saito & Andrade, 2021). The *other* becomes a stranger, distinct from us, stripped of all subjectivity, to the point of not deserving their own humanity (Wieviorka, 2004). Thus, violence and hate speeches can be also nourished through SRs constructed via social media interactions (Rubi & Liloff, 2020). Such discourse, stimulated by political leaders, may be at the heart of the violence taking place in the country against migrants.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study analyzed the SRs of immigrants in Brazil during the 1st year of the Covid-19 pandemic, in the period of February-December 2020. It verified that the pandemic was a platform for the reinforcement of negative attitudes towards immigrants in Brazil, as documented in other studies on a global scale.

As a limitation of the study, it is possible to highlight the relatively low number of texts retrieved from the selected newspapers, partially attributable to two factors:

a. the replacement in the media agenda of the immigrants as 'visible others' by the 'invisible other' at the unexpected arrival of Covid-19 (de Rosa & Mannarini, 2020d; de Rosa et al., 2021e).

b. the restriction of the newspapers' readers who posted their comments on social media to a specific audience of Brazilian people with access to the internet and social

networks. Future studies could include different audiences, in addition to other digital platforms and newspapers to better understand this phenomenon among Brazilians.

Future developments of this study may also expand the research to a wider temporal and geo-political horizon. This could aim at a comparative analysis of the views of transnational migration, as detected in a pre- and post-Covid era, and of the institutional and political discourses of political leaders and religious authorities of other countries/continents

Finally new developments of this type of study could take into account the recontextualization of the (im)migration issues following the massive migratory flows provoked by the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on the 24th of February 2022, which presents the risk of escalation and the threat of nuclear war. This new emergency scenario involves the re-definition of the geo-political equilibrium between countries at the global level, due to the increasing opposition between views of the world as a '*common house*' for humanity open to democratic freedom of thinking and exchanges and the view of the world as territory to be conquered by imperialist and sovereign superpowers.

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