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Bolsonarism: What's in a Name?

Bolsonarismo: O que está por trás de um Nome?

Michele Diana da Luz

Institute of Philosophy, Sociology and Politics

Federal University of Pelotas, Brazil

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-7045-6722

E-mail: micheledluz@gmail.com

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Abstract: Adopting the discursive notion of populism, derived mainly from the works of Ernesto Laclau, the article explores the construction of identities in the discourse of the Brazilian far-right, which has former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro as its main representative. Arguing that Bolsonaro's supporters (the people of Bolsonarism) are grounded in an articulation of meanings that, despite the nationalist tone, is constructed in a populist manner, the article demonstrates how these meanings relate to historical frameworks and permeate social relations at different levels, restoring old political and cultural traditions to create antagonisms that, in turn, result in a highly fragmented political identity of the people, condensed in the signifier of the "good citizen". By pointing out the relevance of observing the cultural and historical elements of each case, the article sheds light on the role played by the mobilisation of negative affects in the processes of identification and construction of the people.

Keywords: populism, nationalism, discourse, Brazil, Latin America

Resumo: Adotando a noção discursiva de populismo, derivada principalmente dos trabalhos de Ernesto Laclau, o artigo explora a construção de identidades no discurso da extrema direita brasileira, a qual tem no presidente Jair Bolsonaro seu principal representante. Argumentando que o povo do bolsonarismo se fundamenta em uma articulação de sentidos que, apesar do tom nacionalista, é construída de forma populista, o artigo demonstra como estes sentidos se relacionam com matrizes históricas e perpassam relações sociais em diferentes níveis, restaurando velhas tradições políticas e culturais para criar antagonismos que, por sua vez, resultam em uma identidade

política do povo que é bastante fragmentada, a qual se condensa no significante do “cidadão de bem”. Apontando a relevância de se observar os elementos culturais e históricos de cada caso, o artigo lança luz sobre o papel desempenhado pela mobilização de afetos negativos nos processos de identificação e construção do povo.

Palavras-chave: populismo, nacionalismo, discurso, Brasil, América Latina

INTRODUCTION

From fascist to an authoritarian populist, there have been many ways to label Brazilian President, Jair Bolsonaro. Generally identified as the epitome of the global rise of the far-right, his electoral success came as a surprise to many, nationally and internationally. Often making the headlines due to his extremist views and using his controversial statements strategically to gather media attention in the presidential elections of 2018 in Brazil, Bolsonaro managed to present an image of an outsider who confronted the political establishment - despite being part of the establishment himself as a congressman for the previous 27 years. There are many characteristics of Bolsonaro’s discourse which can also be found in political actors who gained visibility in recent years around the world. However, when considered within a wider context of emerging right-wing populism, it is important to acknowledge that the Brazilian case has some specificities regarding the way the discourse was articulated, which makes it relevant to be distinguished from other experiences when attempting to develop a deeper comprehension of the political frame worldwide.

Drawing upon Ernesto Laclau’s definition of populism and employing the distinction proposed by De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) between nationalist and populist construction of the people, this paper aims at demonstrating how Bolsonarism, as a far-right political discourse in Brazil, is a populist articulation of meanings - despite its nationalistic tone. Highlighting the connection of those meanings with historical matrices and the way in which they weave through social relations on many levels, my claim is that Bolsonarism, as a populist phenomenon, constructs its people by restoring old political and cultural traditions to (re)create antagonisms which make possible the construction of a very fragmented - yet, persistent - political identity of “the people”, condensed in the signifier of “the good citizen”.

Understanding that the historical and political context are crucial for an adequate analysis of Bolsonarism, this paper focuses on some key aspects of the antagonistic discourse built against the Workers’ Party (PT), which gave rise to the conditions of possibility for far-right discourse embodied by Bolsonaro. The-

se conditions created an “enemy within” which corresponded to the construction of his supporters, a “people”, with distinct characteristics of those mobilised by the far-right discourses in the European cases, for example. To demonstrate this, I briefly address the way in which signifiers were articulated in Bolsonarist discourse and how these articulations depended on a series of elements that were totally contingent. Emphasising that his far-right discourse draws upon historical relations, which carry meanings related to local history, culture and affections, this paper argues that, ultimately, the elements articulated share the same antagonism towards a constitutive Other, which is constructed through a restoration of a political imagery that traces back to our colonial and dictatorial past. Consequently, to apprehend Bolsonarism’s meanings and complexity we must first have to turn to the Brazilian and global political scenes.

That said, the paper is divided into six parts. First, situating the analysis in the post structuralist framework, it presents Ernesto Laclau’s concept of discourse and explains how populism differs from nationalism in terms of the construction of the people and its enemy in this perspective. Next, it addresses the main political and economic movements that preceded the rise of similar discourses in places across the globe. Following this, I discuss the cultural elements involved in the genesis of the Brazilian far-right rise. To do so, I outline the amalgam of demands that enabled the rise of signifiers articulated as the “will of the people” and how it was embodied by Bolsonaro representing the “silent majority”. Considering a few political developments that have gradually built towards the current scenario, the paper demonstrates the importance of a deeper understanding of the discourse and of how they have brought to surface latent aspects of Brazilian society that were decisive for shaping public opinion regarding its politics.

Thereafter, it explains the role of the antagonistic division set towards the Workers’ Party and how *antipetismo* (anti-Workers’ Party feeling) became central for the delimitation of the us *versus* them frontier. This polarisation is fundamental for the construction of the “good citizen” of Bolsonarism, as addressed in the subsequent section. Lastly, some considerations are made regarding the current political scenario in Brazil and its possible developments.

NATIONALISM, POPULISM, AND MOBILISATION OF AFFECTS

When looking at a number of recent political events worldwide (most of which are often considered as part of a “far-right wave”), an important question to ask is: who are the subjects of these political movements? The response to this

question is elementary to properly classify a discourse: such a response contains the symbols, meanings and affects central to it. However, I will start by reiterating what the vast literature in contemporary populism has already asserted: this is a question with no simple nor single answer.

Although it is possible to find a pattern of similarities among right-wing populist and nationalist discourses - among which, authoritarian and even totalitarian traces stand out - within a national context and also in parallel with a number of countries from North to South, defining the identity of "the people" goes beyond it. Thus, while agreeing that Bolsonaro is part of the "far-right wave", trying to fit the Brazilian case into nationalist or right-wing populist concepts and, consequently, simply transposing the notions of *the people* or *the nation* can be problematic if made uncritically. The inconsistency derives from the well-worn debates on the geopolitics of knowledge (Dussel, 1994) in which theories centred on visions and experiences of the North are applied elsewhere. As most contemporary literature highlights (Canovan, 1981, 1999, 2005; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013, 2017), local, cultural, and historical aspects have to be considered when analysing political manifestations of this nature.

Even when considering regional particularities, the line separating one kind of political expression from the other can be blurry. As De Cleen and Stavrakakis point out, much of the confusion derives from the fact that populism and nationalism are two different political expressions with very close empirical connections. Besides the rather common coexistence of both of them, the proximity in the way those discourses are articulated and how they mobilise affects often makes the differentiation between the two very challenging, since both revolve around the sovereignty of "the people", with the same signifier being used to refer to both the people and the nation in many languages (De Cleen, Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 301).

Adding to this confusion is that both political expressions mobilise the affects of nostalgia. Our environment of increasingly complex societies is a prolific field for such phenomena. In recent years, several economic and cultural transitions have exacerbated feelings of insecurity and misrepresentation. It is fair to acknowledge that one of the reasons for the increasing far-right discourse from North to South is its capacity of astutely channelling those feelings via reactive discourses that offer a sense of (restored) order. Often tied to a mythic moment in the past, the main signifiers composing these discourses typically seek to retrieve in people an unachievable feeling of completeness and belonging by referring to a time when "life was simpler and society had values", or, when the "homogeneity of the nation" was a safeguard of its traditions and culture.

As stated at the beginning of this paper, the analysis here draws from a post-structuralist perspective, more specifically, from Ernesto Laclau's concept of discourse. To put it all too briefly, this proposes that social phenomena are conceived as a result of articulatory practices, through which and by which meanings are partially fixed. Its partiality derives from the precarious and contingent terrain in which they perform, always in dispute with other meanings, which are also constantly trying to hegemonize the discursive field. Here, the contingent nature means articulatory practice joins symbolic elements with no necessary previous relation. In order to create an identity, these diffuse elements with differing pre-existing contents find a common ground, which is possible by their entrance in the chain, where they establish a relation of equivalence between one another. As the elements are already invested in meanings, they may or may not share content with one another before entering the chain. However, the process is responsible for operating a temporary transformation of these meanings in order to unify them around an empty signifier that will represent their content. To make it possible, a sublimation of their original content is required. This means that when put in relation to one another, a modification in their identities inevitably occurs: there is a "semantical alteration of their particular contents, prior to entering the articulatory practice, and the result of the practice of articulation is the discourse" (Mendonça, 2003, p. 142).

The temporary alteration of the original meaning is driven by the realisation that they share a common limitation, imposed by an established antagonistic force which prevents them from constituting themselves as hegemonic. Thus, it is the presence of this "constitutive Other" that enables the transitory abandonment of particularities, unifying (through the logic of equivalence) their demands and drawing a frontier between two antagonistic discourses. As such, a discourse is never produced without another one that denies it. In sum, the capacity to form a chain of equivalence, which unites different social subjects whose identities merge to construct a new political subject (Laclau, 2005), is only attainable due to the antagonistic relation that connects heterogeneous demands (which we can imagine, for example, as groups or political ideals) into a hegemonic political project. However, for this project to build its identity, it is also necessary that some of the signifiers acquire a privileged position within the signifying chain, accommodating the demands and embodying the meanings articulated along it. These signifiers are denominated "nodal points", which can be understood as points of reference or privileged cores that overdetermined the meaning of a whole structuration of meanings (De Cleen, Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 306).

Identifying the way discourses are structured is useful in this analysis because it reveals the frontiers drawn between signifiers, and, therefore, how it circumscribes constitutive belonging. In this sense, De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) sustain that populism and nationalism are different ways of discursively constructing and claiming to represent “the people”: as the underdog and as the nation, respectively. Without ignoring the complex interrelations and the co-occurrence of the two phenomena, they distinguish nationalism and populism as two very different spatial arrangements of socio-political antagonisms constructed around either an in/out or a top/down axis of articulation. This spatial distinction presents the minimal concepts for populism and nationalism employed in their formulation, which will also be adopted in this paper. According to their definition, nationalism is “a discourse structured around the nodal point ‘nation’, envisaged as a limited and sovereign community that exists through time and is tied to a certain space, and that is constructed through as in/out opposition between the nation and its out-groups” (De Cleen, Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 310). Populism, on the other hand, is defined as “a dichotomic discourse in which ‘the people’ are juxtaposed to ‘the elite’ along the lines of a down/up antagonism in which ‘the people’ is discursively constructed as a large, powerless group through opposition to ‘the elite’ conceived as a small and illegitimately powerful group” (*idem*). With these distinctions in mind, in addition to identifying the architectonics of the discursive structure of Bolsonarism, I aim to expose its affective dimension, which fantasies of belonging are invested in its signifiers and how they are employed on the member/non-member distinction when constructing the people.

THE FAR-RIGHT POPULIST WAVE

The eruption of far-right movements in many parts of the globe in recent years has stimulated debate around the correct concept to address the phenomena taking place. Definitions lack consensus. They range from “Political Realignment” (Davies, 2019), “Right-wing Populism” (Lazzarato, 2019; Moffit, 2016), “Fascism” (Fukuyama, 2017) and also “Post-Fascism” (Traverso, 2019), indicating that a proper conceptualization of the phenomena is still disputed. Yet, there is a common understanding regarding the motives of this multiplication. Most authors agree that the phenomena derive from a crisis of neoliberalism, more precisely, from its dismissal of popular sovereignty from democracy (Mouffe, 2018; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014; Žižek, 2006, 2012). As Chantal Mouffe (2018) explains, economic and social precarity increased by financial crises, especially after 2008, gave rise to a number of anti-establishment movements,

whose demands challenged the contemporary order and opened the space for new (or renewed) forms of politics. Given its volatile nature and the underlying subjectivity, the unfolding of events was (as it had to be) unpredictable, letting the field open for movements to take a more progressive or regressive turn.

In most contemporary European cases, right-wing populist and nationalist parties have been more successful in articulating those affects, often addressing the demands of the popular sectors in a nationalistic and xenophobic vocabulary and proclaiming to give back to the people the voice that has been confiscated from them by the elites (Mouffe, 2019). Another shared trait of these populist and nationalist discourses is a fear-mongering narrative, causing a fear of the foreigner, commonly identified in the image of immigrants and depicted as anyone who does not belong to “the people” or “the nation”. A rejection of the otherness is sustained on the basis that those ‘aliens’ will end up eroding the country’s traditions and way of living.

This rhetoric has been strong in Europe for decades, but one of the reasons why the recent cycle of right-wing populism and nationalism has caught the world’s attention is the outreach it gained since it crossed the European borders, where it traditionally had a well-defined exclusionary nationalist and anti-immigrant identity and became a central matter in the US. Its impact in the 2016 elections within the so-called most solid democracy in the world was a reminder that developed institutions are not enough to block populist leaders from power. After that realisation, the main concern has shifted from whether populist figures with exclusionary discourses and authoritarian purposes can ascend to power in consolidated democracies to how institutions prevent their abuse of power once they are elected.

BRAZIL

Aiming to analyse how democracies can be destroyed from within, the timely work of Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) examines well-known cases of collapsed democracies over the past decades, providing many examples of how democratic institutions have been subjected to partisan control by authoritarian leaders at different levels. Comparing the circumstances, the institutional apparatus of each of the countries and its cultural backgrounds, the authors conclude that institutions alone cannot sustain democracy, and that the soft guardrails of democracy rest in the shared norms of a given society.

When we look at Brazil in this regard, we fall into a theoretical dispute (Abranches, 1988; Ames, 2001; Figueiredo, Limongi, 1999, 2000, 2006; Power,

2010) that has been the terrain for constant debate and controversy among political scientists between those interested in the role of institutions and those who focus on the cultural aspects of politics. While the first group often focuses on discussing the implications of Brazilian institutional design and its consequences (including on people's behaviour), the second concentrates on the cultural features underlying political actions and how they impact institutions' functioning. Understanding that one of the conditions for consolidating democracy is the legitimacy of its political institutions in the eyes of society (Baquero, Vasconcelos, 2013), the cultural approach sustains that when the mediation between the State and society does not work, political instability is constant, despite formal democratic procedures. It is important not to deny this complexity, however, for the purposes of this paper, the cultural approach is the primary mode of analysis.

Brazilian political culture is often classified as hybrid (Baquero, 2008), since it combines a) elements of formal and procedural democratic improvements; b) support for authoritarian measures, institutional distrust; c) high levels of social inequality. Studies show that one of the main reasons why institutions are not trusted by many Brazilians is that they often see them as a tool for the political class to achieve its corrupt interests. This perception is rooted deep in the social structure, crossing over all levels of income, education, race, gender and age, influencing citizen's willingness not to vote and indicating high dissatisfaction with democracy's functioning (Moisés, 1995).

Although the origins of distrust cannot be narrowed to the recent past, going back to the colonial history, like most countries in Latin America, Brazilian recent political history is marked by its dictatorial regime (1964-1985), which has strongly influenced the country's political culture. This is one of the reasons why, when considered as a part of a global right-wing wave, the Brazilian case can be especially problematic. Considering how the transition from dictatorship to democracy took place, it is no surprise that Brazil has been repeatedly categorised as the Latin American country with the lowest belief in democracy (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2016). Many factors account for this, but high tolerance for authoritarian measures and institutionalised violence are prominent ones. Given this and the worsening polarisation that has been manifested in Brazil in the last decade, the concern regarding the strength and the popularity of far-right policies is justified in a reality where authoritarian discourse, which replays the patterns of the recent dictatorial past, continues to have significant support.

The dictatorial regime in Brazil lasted 21 years, during which individual freedom and human rights were repressed through institutional acts, censorship, and persecution of political opposers. The effective implementation of the regime and its maintenance in power for so long was largely supported by a considerable

portion of the society. The civilian-military coup resulted from a complex coalition in which civilians played a vital role, led by businessmen, parts of the Catholic Church¹, a large proportion of the middle class and even by the Brazilian Bar Association (OAB). It is important to state, however, that while the 1964 coup was the result of a broad coalition in which civilians were substantial, its main agents were military.

After a gradual decline at the beginning of the 1980s, the regime officially ended in 1985 and Brazil began to find its way back to democracy, in a route that was promising but full of obstacles. In 1988, the approval of the “Citizen’s Constitution”, which was built on social integration and with active participation of the civil society, meant there were high hopes for a more inclusive and equal society. In the following year, the first direct presidential election in 29 years gave victory to Fernando Collor de Mello, an unknown candidate with no relevant party base nor ties with the social movements fundamental in the re-democratization, who gained popularity by promising to end corruption in politics.

Soon after this seemingly optimistic moment, the first stumble came in the form of a political crisis, which, aided by the severe economic instability inherited from the military regime, culminated in the impeachment of the first President elected by direct popular vote since 1960. In the years that followed, corruption scandals and economic crises became a constant matter, reinforcing a feeling of distrust not only in the political class, but also in the value of democracy.

Looking back, we can identify and give careful consideration to the silent social affections which were maintained, stirred and encouraged with certain political developments. As noted, Brazilian society maintains strong authoritarian traces in its culture, politics, and judicial system, in large part due to how the transition from military regime to democracy took place. Unlike other South American countries, Brazil opted for an amnesty process marked by conciliation and a reconciliatory tone (Cunha, 2010), which even kept some laws from the authoritarian period in the new Constitution. But the social conflicts did not end with the shift from an authoritarian to a democratic regime (Teles, Safatle, 2010). One of their most visible traces was an increasing normalisation of State violence

¹ The Catholic Church’s involvement in the Brazilian military regime is not unilateral: on the one hand, most influential authorities supported the coup, as they believed the deposed president, João Goulart, was a threat to the prevailing social order due to his reformist policies. On the other one, priests, nuns, and bishops whose work was closer to the popular classes strongly opposed the regime and advocated for human rights, using the church’s structure for protecting people persecuted by the military and educating the vulnerable. They were seen as collaborating with the resistance movements and gradually became targets of political persecution.

towards its citizens and the impunity of those who perpetrated crimes in the name of the State against its own population. In a transition sustained on oblivion, in which the guilty were never punished for their crimes, the naturalisation of violence is one of the social symptoms of a fragile democracy, with the society tolerant and supportive of the use of the “necessary evil” (Kehl, 2010).

After democracy was re-established, most of the pro-government political figures from the military regime remained in power under new parties, but few people would stand up to defend the military regime and those who did, would mostly advocate for it in a veiled language. Even when some people would gather in front of the Congress and call for a military coup, it appeared unrealistic, because since the 1990s, major right-wing parties had adopted a new guise of technocratic management, overwhelmingly concerned with neoliberal economic measures and complying with conservative values. The most ardent ideological tenets were still there, but remained mostly unspoken. The dictatorship seemed to be the thing of the past. Yet, due to a combination of factors, recently the place held by the military in Brazilian social imaginary became more and more evident.

Particularly for older Brazilians, the military are seen as guardians of righteousness, as they are “the ones who saved the country from the dangers of communism and prevented it from ending up like Cuba” (Bolsonaro, 2015). Praised with nostalgia, the regime is often recalled by them as a time in which they “felt safer and when politics was not corrupted” (Bolsonaro, 2015). It is a narrative that has been gaining traction amongst younger generations, who more and more believe that the military regime was good and that “history books are part of a plot of leftist academics and the media to tell only their view of the events” (Bolsonaro, 2016). The more these ideas spread and are reinforced by a narrative which disregards the historical accuracy of events, the clearer it becomes that one of the dangers we face today, as a result of the State’s failure to penalise the dictatorship after (re)democratisation, is the capacity it leaves for those who want to rewrite history.

The denial of human rights violations conducted by the military has increased, leading to two main arguments: 1) that torture and killing were not a standard behaviour from the police; or, 2) if there were practices of such nature, they were justified by the war against communism. The constant exaltation of the repressive means employed to contain any discordant voice as not only acceptable, but necessary, exposes the despise for human rights as one of the strongest ties Brazilian society has with its dictatorial past. Nowadays, the vestiges of an authoritarian culture are often unveiled by people’s endorsement of state violence against its own citizens who fail to comply with the shared norms of the social contract.

Jessé de Souza (2019) argues that the recurring support by diverse social sectors for physical punishment, deprivation of rights and even state killings in prisons and slums demonstrates the permanence of a mentality that dates further back to the colonial times and slavery. There is a long history of state negligence on this, largely amplified by the implementation of neoliberal policies, blurring the state's indifference towards those who have been marginalised. The outcome is the perpetuation of exclusionary structures and the fostering of the existing punitive culture in the country, where the intersection between race and poverty is so blatant, reinforcing a vicious cycle that deepens the gap between those who belong - the "real citizens" - and those who do not.

In the face of such a disparate reality, there is no natural common ground, and a common identity has to be constructed around a signifier which allows people from very dissimilar backgrounds to be included. It acquires even more importance when we take into account Brazil's vast geography, its multifaceted cultural influences and its exacerbated inequality (along class, race, gender, etc.). National symbols surely have a place in this process, but the use of them does not make a discourse, necessarily, nationalist. Prior to the symbols that represent this unification (and that are important to uphold), a line has to be drawn to determine those who are part of it and those who are not, that is to say, who is eligible to share those symbols and identity, and who is regarded as incompatible with them.

US AND THEM

As previously outlined, contemporary Brazilian political discourse results from an articulation of factors, whose patterns have been long present in the country's history. Although they are a continuum, they haven't always been displayed in the same way. Therefore, it is also important to succinctly present an overview of the path that led to Bolsonaro's election from an ideological perspective.

The (re)democratisation process and the reorganisation of the political parties in Brazil after 1979² marked an ideological cleavage, producing what became known as "the ashamed right" (de Souza, 1988). It consisted of right-wing Brazilian parties who wanted to dissociate their image from the authoritarian regime – at a time when the definition of right and left ideology was directly connected to their engagement (or not) with the military dictatorship

² Multipartyism was brought back to Brazilian politics in 1979, after the granting of political amnesty and political party reform (in 1979) carried out by the military regime. From 1979 and 1985, the Brazilian military dictatorship employed a "political opening" (Codato, 2006).

(Tarouco, Madeira, 2013). Since then, for over two decades, the political arena lacked a relevant party, which would openly advocate for the right-wing ideology (Mainwaring et al., 2000). It doesn't mean, however, that there were no parties with right-wing orientation. On the contrary, since the 1990s, neoliberal principles have heavily guided economic policies (even in left-wing administrations), and religious conservative sectors have always been an important branch of any political campaign and administration in the country.

But the scene started changing visibly after the re-election of Dilma Rousseff (Workers' Party - PT) in 2014, when the opposition candidate, Aécio Neves (Brazilian Social Democratic Party - PSDB), did not accept the narrow defeat and initiated a process of questioning the legitimacy of the results. Soon after that, dissatisfied groups contested and denied the integrity of the electoral process, suggesting that the Workers' Party was not democratic and would do anything to stay in power. It was the beginning of a crisis that would lead to Rousseff's impeachment, later in 2016, and open the way for an increasing polarisation.

In light of these events, it became apparent that the far-right discourse we witness today in Brazil arose also as a response to the progressive experiences of what became known as the pink wave (Chodor, 2015; Panizza, 2006; Schavelzon, 2016) in Latin America in the early 2000s. As part of the wave, Brazil experienced meaningful social changes under the Workers' Party administrations. It was a time of considerable progressive change, when social policies aiding the poor were implemented, followed by affirmative-action initiatives targeted to help minority and socially excluded groups whilst market expansion focused on lower-middle-class growth made the traditional upper and middle classes very uncomfortable.

Yet, series of corruption scandals³ slowly tainted the good image of the the party, leading to a withdrawal of its traditional supporters (by then, overwhelmingly composed of middle-class voters), who migrated to support centre-right parties⁴. As the scandals grew over the years and spread to other traditional parties - although weighing heavier on PT - an apolitical and anti-partisan feeling started to escalate. Helped by a media coverage, the discontentment found its way to streets demonstrations, which provided the space for aspiring opinion leaders and relatively unknown political figures to pose as outsiders and associate their

³ The first and most famous erupted in 2005 and became known as "Mensalão". It was a scheme that used public funds to pay coalition parties for political support.

⁴ Overall, those who shortly managed to embody the growing prominence of the Judiciary, built around the political scandals targeting leading members of the Workers' Party and related contractors who financed and benefitted from corruption schemes.

names to the signifiers at play – mostly the fight against the corruption of the establishment.

The first prominent examples of the traction it gained were the massive street protests that occurred all over the country in 2015 and went on through 2016. Beside exposing a myriad of discontent from a big portion of Brazilian population towards the government and the political class, those mobilisations brought to light several meanings around which the right-wing articulated the key signifiers of its discourse: “anti-corruption”, “anti-left” and “*antipetismo*”⁵.

The most visible propagators of these ideas were four groups: Movimento Endireita Brasil⁶, Revoltados Online⁷, Vem pra Rua⁸ and Brasil Livre⁹. Even though not all of them were created in the context of the impeachment, it was only at that time that they gained political relevance and visibility¹⁰. But the discourse of this “unashamed right” was not univocal. There were many voices and demands forming the right-wing upheaval, and although most of them have mobilised around the main signifiers, internal disagreements persisted. Despite it, they unified to oppose a force they all considered a threat for their existence. Using an anti-corruption crusade, the groups consolidated their demands advocating for two primary agendas: economic neoliberalism and conservative morality.

Even though group leaders and many of the demonstrators stressed the non-partisan motivation of the protests, as it grew, some politicians succeeded in associating their image to these mobilisations and their values. The outstanding case was President Jair Bolsonaro, who at the time was an unknown congressman. As well as actively participating in the protests, Bolsonaro gained attention from people who usually do not engage in politics by promoting the antagonism with the Worker's Party and the meanings associated with the anti-corruption and anti-left signifiers in an extremist way, presenting himself as an outsider, even though he had been a politician for most of his life.

As it consolidated, the contemporary right-wing discourse in Brazil held economic neoliberalism and moral conservatism as its ideological orientation, and so did Bolsonaro. While the economic axis entailed the endorsement of neoliberal ideas by the market, the demand for a more conservative morality worked

⁵ Anti-Workers' Party.

⁶ This name has a double complementary meaning in Portuguese, implying at the same time “turn Brazil to the right” (ideologically) and “straighten Brazil”, in the moral sense.

⁷ Outraged Online.

⁸ Take the streets.

⁹ Free Brazil.

¹⁰ The groups also had the support of relatively well-known artists and social influencers, who helped to capture the attention of their audience towards the political flags of the movement.

to garner the support of religious leaders and their growing congregations. Many of those religious leaders were already part of the political establishment and found a way to accommodate their moral agendas within the “new” emerging discourse.

Briefly, we could say that the neoliberal signifier in Brazil comes from the idea that “the State is too big and inefficient” when it comes to the services it provides (mainly referring to health, education and security). Similarly on morality, the state is considered inefficient, but this is framed as the consequence of the political classes’ ethical vacuity, which instigated frustration with the establishment. The main cause of inefficiency in the public perception of the two, inevitably, narrows down to corruption: economically, because “a minimal state could tear down the corrupt political structures” (Bolsonaro, 2018); morally, because “the State should not interfere in individual choices with its corrupt ideas, such as in children’s education concerning gender ideology” (Bolsonaro, 2017). The capacity to adapt to those individual demands comfortably - at least temporarily - relied largely on the consensus that the private sphere (rather than the State) should serve as the primary source of economic security and moral codes. It is an agreement anchored in the understanding of corruption as a product of the political class and limited almost exclusively to the State’s activity.

Notwithstanding, the fight against corruption within Brazilian politics has traditionally been associated with the military, which was exploited by Bolsonaro. The association dates back to at least the 1920s and “tenentismo”, a political movement led by lower-ranking officials within the military forces who criticised political oligarchies and advocated for social and political reforms seeking “morality and the end of corruption”. It was also an important part of the 1964 military coup, an event praised as a “revolution” by Bolsonaro and a considerable number of his supporters. It is important, however, not to homogenise the specific circumstances and characteristics of these events. Yet, on both occasions, the direct result was the military taking power and installing authoritarian regimes. While in the contemporary right-wing revival the fight against corruption was once again the nodal point, the incorporation of other signifiers into it provided an assimilation of them and a partial shift into what has become the main signifier of the antagonistic relation in the discourse: the “antipetismo”.

ANTIPETISMO

Being aware of the heterogeneity of meanings accommodated in Brazilian far-right discourse is important. Not all Bolsonaro voters chose him solely because of the economic or moral agendas he borrowed from the emerging “proud right-wing” discourse. Neither were his economic, environmental, and social policies clear to the general public. There are different factors that can explain his rise and later election: the economic crisis; the growing level of violence; the dissatisfaction with the political class after recurring corruption scandals (with a media coverage targeting the Workers’ Party); and a parallel rise in conservative thinking, including the ascent of neopentecostal churches’ in politics and in the media.

Alone, none of these factors was strong enough to hegemonize the social field. However, they were all important for triggering the political crisis that led to the rise of the far-right. Corruption scandals, economic crisis and distrust of political parties have been a regular feature of Brazilian political culture. Yet, it was the antagonism towards the Workers’ Party, which made the articulation of key signifiers possible. Otherwise, the social phenomena we observe today, which is represented by Bolsonaro, but is broader and deeper than his leadership, wouldn’t probably have the extent it does.

Without falling into a strictly economic perspective, it is important to highlight that the plunge in international commodities prices, which led to an increase in inflation rates and the loss of purchasing power after years of “inclusion via consumption” policies, played an important role in the public imagination. This perception was crucial for the resignification of the chain, relocating the anti-left and anti-PT signifiers, which were gradually associated with anti-corruption.

Nevertheless, it is important to establish the antagonism at the core of the discourse Bolsonaro represents. This antagonism positions the Workers’ Party (the biggest party on the left in Latin America) as a threat for the country and its “good citizens”. The left was still a force to be fought against, but PT was the designated enemy, as it had held institutional power for the previous 14 years (from 2003 to 2016). For “antipetismo” to emerge as an antagonising discourse that mobilised the people, PT had to embody all the meanings of the “Other”, representing all those who had prevented this political movement from growing. This way, be it in the name of Dilma Rousseff, of Lula, or of any other notorious members of the party, PT was (and still is) signified by the right as the root of all the social, moral, and economic problems of the country.

In a broader sense, when referring to the left, Bolsonaro signified it as “incompatible with democracy” and “self-interested”. Any policy that suggested collective demands of social groups or anyone who identified as being left-wing were “tarnished” as “supporters of PT”. They were thus denounced on the same basis. From this perspective, Bolsonaro condemned the left-thinking promoted among young people at universities, schools and in the media by the leftist intellectual and artistic elites, suggesting that their goal was “to destroy the traditional family values and to turn kids gay”¹¹. He also argued that the focus in Brazilian education had long shifted from teaching to indoctrinating kids under “communist guises”: be it the defending human rights (seen by him as a way of protecting criminals) or social movements promoting ideas detrimental to what the “good citizens” would like to see their money spent on.

Constantly attacking and discrediting the media, the artistic class, and intellectuals (all framed by Bolsonaro as part of the elite and as PT supporters who endorse its ideas, because they supposedly gained a lot of money from the leftist government), Bolsonaro reinforced the image of himself as a man on a mission to clean Brazil from those with obtuse moral intentions orchestrated by the leftists. Posing as “different from other politicians”, he managed to distance himself from the political establishment, which allowed him to portray an image of a simple, honest and incorruptible man - a man like “the people” he represented, whose will and enemies were the same. To top it off, Bolsonaro promised “to safeguard the values of family and the nation, repairing the damages caused to them by the corruption and criminality of the left” (Bolsonaro, 2018).

Bolsonaro also mobilized stigmatized elements of Brazilian political culture, which are still contentious and very dear to a large number of people. The “communist menace” was one of them. In the past, this trope had been used to justify military coups and “prevent Brazil from adopting communist politics and becoming another Cuba” (Bolsonaro, 2015). Currently, a refashioned version of this trope is at work interpolating the Venezuelan crisis and the so-called Bolivarian ideology as new threats to the old Brazilian values and safety. As Rodrigo Pato Sá Motta (2019) argues, this repetition exposes the extent to which anticommunism is rooted in Brazilian society, constituting a political tradition that is restored and rebuilt at different times. Its recurrence exposes a fear regarding social and cultural transformation and manifests its conservative affections by doubling down on moral and religious values and traditional social hierarchy. Moreover, it echoes a fear which goes beyond the actual aims and strengths of communists: a fear that the underdog and the excluded might ascend and question the estab-

¹¹ Bolsonaro’s statement on March 20, 2015 (and many other occasions).

lished hierarchy. Communism represents a trigger for behavioural, moral, and religious changes. Therefore, labelling policies, behaviours, movements, parties, and ideas as “communist” is a handy strategy to heighten the feeling that the social order is under threat: nothing disturbs conservative opinion more. When taken to an extreme, this fear and insecurity can encourage people to embrace authoritarian interventions in the name of a promised safety (Motta, 2019).

If in the past a military coup was seen as the solution to this threat, nowadays it might not be as acceptable. Largely due to the economic costs of a traditional coup (like unilateral and regional sanctions or trade embargoes imposed by other countries on account of human rights concerns), the military's role in the modern coup has been redesigned. During Bolsonaro's campaign, the military's name and image were useful for constructing a “memory” of order and prosperity which could be regained. It was also praised for its educational models and the ideals of discipline and respect that should be restored into schools and society. Once in office, the military's participation in Bolsonaro's government outnumbered the military regime in terms of personnel¹², which also translated in its policies.

Additionally, operating covertly during Bolsonaro's campaign, the market was also a big player behind the scenes of the far-right's rise. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the person of the Minister of Economy, Paulo Guedes, a “Chicago boy”¹³, who praises the Chilean economic model under Pinochet's regime. The regular mention of his name as Bolsonaro's minister was a clear promise of a market-friendly agenda. The economic model endorsed by Bolsonaro was backed by both old political elites in power (represented mainly by the three known political groups: Bullets, Beef and Bible¹⁴) and the groups and opinion leaders who gained visibility after 2014. Waving the flagship of administrative, political, and social reforms, the market's backing of Bolsonaro garnered the support of economic liberals and convinced many people that decreasing the State's influence would restore economic stability. On the one hand, the moral

¹² For the first year of his presidency (2019) Bolsonaro announced nine military officials for high-ranking positions, two more than during the military regime, under Médici (1969-1974) and Geisel (1974-1979) (Correio Braziliense, 2018). A study conducted by the Brazilian Federal Court of Auditors (TCU) showed that the number of military personnel in commissioned positions grew over 36% between 2018 (last year of Michel Temer's government) and 2020 (Metropoles, 2021).

¹³ Group of young (mostly) Chilean economists who studied in the 1970s at the University of Chicago under Nobel Prize-winner Milton Friedman (1912–2006). Their ideas influenced Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet to apply free-market policies to open the economy and privatise state companies.

¹⁴ Conservative hardliners representing the interests of security forces, agribusiness sector and Evangelical churches.

agenda was a strong factor to mobilize people's affects regarding their fears of a demise in values and social order. On the other one, the neoliberal economic appeal supplemented this discourse by emphasizing the need for a smaller state, whose limited interference was presented as the solution not only for the economic policies themselves, but also by curbing the reach of corrupt elites.

THE PEOPLE

If we hold to a rigid definition of right-wing populism and nationalism to classify Bolsonarism, attaching the phenomenon to one or another would require a certain conceptual stretch. Bolsonarism's appeal to "the people" does not circumscribe to a specific part of the population in terms of ethnicity or class - though it does, ultimately, have a pre-eminence among the white, male and upper middle-class voters (Datafolha, 2018). There are no "native people" nor "underdog" figures that can be easily distinguishable from "the others". Yet, the we-versus-them frontier is, undoubtedly, constitutive of Bolsonarism as a discourse. So, to understand Bolsonarism adequately, it is necessary to grasp the other ways in which this people is constructed.

Due to its complex historic development as a colonised country, constructing a "people" on the basis of an ethnic national identity in Brazil is almost impossible. The Brazilian population is known for its ethnic diversity. The wide range of places from where the population arrived after consecutive waves of immigration over many centuries to form the "demographic" people is widely applauded and used to substantiate a narrative of a highly tolerant culture, in which diversity is welcomed. Continuously evoked, the blended origins narrative has consolidated a perception of a supposed tolerance, which makes Brazil a country in which opportunities are equally available to everyone. Yet, what this myth actually produces is an excuse to perpetuate the reproduction of inequalities at all levels, since it allows those with privileges to ignore the inequality that sustains this privilege.

De Souza defines a myth as: "a transfiguration of reality in order to provide meaning, moral and spiritually, to individuals and social groups of a particular society" (de Souza, 2009, p. 21). In the case of the racial democracy myth in Brazil, it is important to highlight that it is a long-institutionalised myth, which was culturally perpetuated after repeated attempts to whitewash Brazilian population in the past, and is particularly strong in the far-right discourse represented by Bolsonaro. It is part of a cultural imagination that condenses a range of interpretations and ideas, which merely allows for the acceptance of many forms of

oppression. In this sense, the fallacy of tolerance produces a veil of equality within Brazilian society that is totally detached from reality.

The Brazilian population originates from a mingling of cultures and their respective beliefs. Yet, as is the case for all countries with slavery as a historical pillar, the identity represented as dominant does not correspond to reality. It is overwhelmingly portrayed as white, male, middle class and Christian. This representation not only ignores visible ethnic differences of the population but also the religious syncretism embraced in the definition of “Christian” that is intrinsic to Brazilian religiosity. Underlying this disregard is a denial of the vast cultural heritage of non-white people in the national culture and, most of all, the debt owed to those who were enslaved. Among the many social and political effects of this whitewashing is the universalising of white, upper-middle class material conditions to lower classes, who are primarily non-white. The perception then is that the life conditions of everyone are the same, further legitimising the idea that individual merit is the reason some people achieve social and economic success and others do not (de Souza, 2009, p. 17). It is also what justified the objections raised when affirmative-action policies were implemented, the blind eye turned towards all kinds of inequalities, and the punitive rhetoric regarding the greater violence(s) towards and killings of non-whites.

Jessé de Souza (2009) explains that, in order to conquer the hearts and minds of regular people, the national myth, or national social imagery, has to be internalised as something of our own, as an inseparable part of our personality. Therefore, the construction of a myth must be a part of constructing a national identity. As “the people” of populism does not require a correlation with the demographic population, the right-wing populist discourse represented by Bolsonaro ignored those visible inequalities in its articulation of meanings. Instead, it aimed to unify the heterogeneous population by mobilizing shared reactive affections.

From 2003 to 2013¹⁵ Brazil experienced a period of economic growth, led mainly by high global commodity prices. The heated economy enabled the government to increase wages, employment rates and promote policies to reduce poverty and inequality, which helped to maintain a good approval rate for Lula’s administration and helped to elect Dilma in 2010. After 2014, however, the country could not escape the international economic downturn, and the decline of the economic activity was felt by the population. The Brazilian far-right read the moment and used the economic crisis to seize the opportunity by gaining the attention of those who felt left behind by the establishment. They tapped into social

¹⁵ Lula’s first and second term; Dilma’s first term.

fears such as “the destruction of the traditional family values”, “the indoctrination of children according to communist principles”, “the impunity of criminals” and “the overrule of state”, to establish a dividing line(s) between “the enemies” and “the people” by targeting those allegedly responsible for this “moral and economic decay”.

Contemporary literature on populism has highlighted that there are different ways to delimit the antagonistic frontier between “the people” and “the enemy”, since that line is drawn according to other factors such as regional, temporal and cultural order. In Bolsonarism, the line was established on many fronts but in such a way that the enemy (they) always referred to the Workers’ Party. The figure below presents a compilation of the main dichotomies employed by Bolsonarism to construct the “them” *versus* “us” frontier:

FIGURE 1 - BOLSONARISM MAIN DICHOTOMIES TOWARDS THE IDENTITY OF “THE GOOD CITIZEN”

Us	Them
Workers	Vagabonds
Good citizens	Criminals
Christians	Marxists / Leftists
Majority	Activists
Brazilians	Globalists
Common People	The System
Police Officers	Human Rights NGOs
Productive Sector	Political Class / Social Groups
Democracy	Dictatorship
Israel supporters	Palestine supporters
Patriots	Communists
Advocate for a Minimal State/Free Market	Use the State for Self-Benefit / “Nanny-State” mentality
Freedom fighters	Totalitarianism
Meritocracy	Victimhood
Truth (social media)	Manipulation (mainstream media)
Honest	Corrupt
Private ownership	Expropriation
Want to unite society	Want to divide society

Source: Elaborated by the author from Bolsonaro’s posts on Facebook between 2015 and 2018.

The figure shows that “the people” (us) of Bolsonarism is constructed around signifiers that generate identification in a broad sense. The lack of a rigid definition of the people is of extreme importance for the popularity of Bolsonarism as a political phenomenon. It is precisely the variety of ways, in which it is possible to belong within the “us” sphere of the discourse that enables the building of an identity which can be shared by so many in such an unequal society. The “people” and the “enemy” still carry traces of the classic populist models, in which “the people” is designated as simple and honest, and “the enemy” is composed of an evil, corrupt, and self-interested elite (Müller, 2017). It is the sense of belonging to each of these dichotomous parts that differs.

Them, “the elite”, “the establishment”, “the leftists”, “the enemies in power who manipulate the good people (us) for their own gain”, must be antagonised, confronted, dethroned. In order to do that, the “silent majority”, “the good citizens”, “the ones who work hard and pay their taxes”, “the ones who believe in God and want to protect their families” have to be united and represented by “one of them”, someone who aligns with the values and beliefs of “the people”, who confronts the enemies and does not agree to become part of the establishment. In this division, the moral agenda is linked to right and left ideologies (and all the related meanings tied to it) in a construction of the discourse that makes this division crucial for determining who is who. As the figure shows, Bolsonarism operates mainly by mobilizing reactive affects, which are triggered and channelled by negative feelings, such as fear, frustration and abandonment in a way that the antagonistic force (the Other) is pointed as the cause of it. In this sense, “the good citizens” can be seen as a sort of the Nietzschean “creature of *ressentiment*” (Deleuze, 1983): they need others to be evil in order to consider themselves good (Salmela, Capelos, 2021). It is the ethical determination of good and bad according to moral judgement, which lets people belong or not belong.

Binding elements which crisscross the moral and the economic agenda, “the good citizen” became the identity of the people of Bolsonarism, the signifier which mobilized people’s affections and provided the sense of belonging. In such a way, “the good citizen” is a homogenizing figure around which a series of meanings are allocated to construct a subject. It also represents the point of intersection of the two main axes of the discourse, the economic and the moral agendas.

Morally, this subject is represented mainly by the signifier “family”: it espouses a traditional Christian core image, often opposing “gender ideology” and “minority movements” that allegedly want to destroy it. It is a representation that creates identification and satisfies the ever-growing religious constituency in Brazil. It draws from and reinforces the conservative culture that has a long history in the country: the image of a strongman’s leadership is accentuated as an

analogy to the traditional family set-up of Christian religions, whose sacredness is continuously exalted by its main leaders and “gurus”.

Economically, “liberty” is the main goal and the single reason why the left should be removed from power. Freedom is a frequent signifier in Bolsonarism and was important to garner support from libertarian groups. Understood as an absence of constraint, Bolsonaro and his supporters often used freedom of speech to justify their racist, xenophobic, and sexist views, accusing the left of authoritarianism whenever such views were condemned. This signifier also played a central role in the economic policy agenda. Bolsonaro represents quite a peculiar form of neoliberalism, blending the support of a strong State against criminals and within the educational apparatus but rejecting its interference in the economy. His market-oriented views were important to attract and mobilize citizens who felt that policies implemented by previous administrations only advanced the corruption and inefficiency of the State¹⁶. Regularly using the US legislation and the country’s freedom as the reason for its success (in terms of power, wealth, and morals), Bolsonarism promoted the perception that the State was a problem, not a solution for those in need, and that anyone with the right willpower could be successful, if the corrupt elite was removed from power.

This, again, was not a novelty of Bolsonarism. Brazilian culture draws strongly from the global North, particularly from the United States of America. The aspiration to be “like a brother to the North” can be identified in the recurrent exaltation of the way things are done there and that they should be replicated in Brazil “if the country is ever to be as great and powerful as it can be, if things were done the way they are there” (Bolsonaro, 2017). Jessé de Souza (2009) suggests that much of this identification is due to the perception of Brazil as being the only other country in the continent with the same potential as the US, given its size and natural resources. Often, the semblance is perceived as a shallow version of nationalism, the mimetics of symbols, ideas and behaviours. Amongst Bolsonaro’s supporters, patriotism tends to be encouraged through the vindication of popular national symbols: the flag, the pride in its colours and the pride of being Brazilian. Because of this image, Bolsonarism tends to be interpreted as a nationalistic phenomenon. But a closer inspection shows that Bolsonarism is a “straw man” of nationalism. Patriotism was, and still is, an important signifier of the Brazilian far-right discourse, but it does not represent a deep

¹⁶ Bolsonaro’s inclination to a more neoliberal economic agenda resulted from his association with libertarian groups who led the 2015 and 2016 street protests Dilma Rousseff. Previously to this articulation, he often advocated for a more interventionist State.

connection with an ancient national root, a proper national cultural product or even a distinct identity.

Bolsonaro's attempt to build a patriotic image tries to recycle a repertoire of symbols from Brazil's dictatorial past - which he denies having been a dictatorship - but it does not establish an external enemy. It is a generic and shallow nationalism, manufactured to replicate a patriotism believed by him and his supporters to be superior to all others (that of the United States). It is in this sense a "canned nationalism"¹⁷: a patriotism that lauds the national flag, the national anthem and military authorities, yet accepts a submissive place in geopolitical relations and the undervaluation of its own national assets. As such, it is imperative to clarify whether nationalist demands actually play a structuring role in Bolsonarism's discourse or if the nation-state rhetoric merely serves as a context for populist politics.

From the arguments made in this paper, it is clear that the us/them frontier of Bolsonarism was constructed through a down/up (populist) axis rather than in an in/out (nationalist) one. Yet, the horizontal separation of those who belong from those who do not is not clear-cut. The absence of an underdog figure makes it harder to classify Bolsonarism as a purely populist discourse and the effort to absorb national symbols into it can make this distinction problematic. The construction of "the people" in the signifier of the "good citizen" helps to elucidate how (in the far-right discourse) this subject marks a large, powerless group opposing the small and illegitimately powerful "elite of leftists" personified in the Workers' Party, the political establishment, the traditional media and the intellectual/cultural elites. From all those characteristics and, above all, by the way in which the discourse is built, it becomes evident that Bolsonarism consists of a populist discourse with strong authoritarian features, which is particularly worrying given Brazilian political culture and its history.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Far-right discourse in Brazil did not begin with Bolsonarism nor will it cease with the end of his Presidency. It is the result of a series of previous articulations of deep-rooted cultural-historical signifiers. Bolsonaro's electoral success was fuelled by a social resentment, which had been successfully driven by the far-right mobilization of reactionary sentiment and the use of mass, well-

¹⁷ Due to the strong influence of the United States in Brazilian consumption habits, common sense usually employs the term "enlatado" (canned) to designate the uncritical adoption of behaviours from the US.

organised hate discourse spread widely on social media, mostly in the form of fake news.

In this context, a political culture with strong historical ties to an authoritarian concept of democracy played a major role. The long history of conservatism derived from Brazil's strong religious traditions was influential on the articulation of the heterogeneous far-right discourse. Although tied to these cultural traditions, the "good citizen" in that discourse is constantly being rebuilt and re-signified.

From his election in 2018 till the presidential dispute in 2022, Bolsonaro was undergoing a process of increasing isolation in the political arena, but it still holds the cards to work with the Congress and his most fervent supporters do not seem to be swayed by any allegations against the president. Traditional parties of the right and left have learned the hard way that polarisation is a dangerous game to play, and that this kind of politics can lay the foundation for all kinds of antagonisms.

While the left is slowly learning that it must re-engage with its electoral base and "speak their language" once again in order to mobilize their frustrations into a positive and inclusionary project, what is certain is that the awakening of the far-right in Brazilian politics is not going to disappear soon. Even with Bolsonaro's failing in being re-elected in 2022, the reactive affections mobilized by his supporters have proven hard to be silenced.

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