Dossier: Grammars of Bolsonarismo

Of what is Bolsonaro the name?

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> *[O]ne might refer to the fascist movements as the wounds, the scars, of a democracy that, to this day, has not lived up to its own concept.*
>
> Theodor Adorno

What's in a name?

First things first: to speak of 'Bolsonarismo' is not the same as speaking of Bolsonaro voters. Evidently, whatever we can call 'Bolsonarismo' must have been a factor in Jair Bolsonaro's November 2018 election; but the former army captain's victory was overdetermined in all sorts of ways, and the electoral coalition that brought him to power is broader than any phenomenon we can accurately describe with that name. In short, not every Bolsonaro voter is a Bolsonarista – a distinction that it is both analytically and politically essential to make.

Smaller than Bolsonaro's actual or potential electorate, Bolsonarismo is at the same time bigger than Bolsonaro himself: neither created by nor solely dependent on the individual from whom it borrows its name. This means that the link between 'leader' and 'movement' is synthetic rather than analytic, and its strength hinges not on some essential bond but on the contingent fact that, having found himself at the crest of a groundswell at a critical time, Bolsonaro now has more power to shape it than anyone else. In short, my contention is that Bolsonarismo is a real convergence of different trends in Brazilian society, with the potential to consolidate itself as a major force for quite some time; but the arrangement of political forces that expresses it is neither coherent nor necessarily stable. In fact, one of its key sources of instability is precisely Bolsonaro and his sons, owing to their divisiveness, shady connections and constant attacks on potential challengers to their control over this political capital.

'Bolsonarista' thus refers to a social segment that has acquired an explicit political orientation in the last eight years or so through an interactive relation with leaders like Bolsonaro, even if the fact that the latter came to dominate it is itself contingent. It can be estimated at around 15% of the population; considering Bolsonaro's approval ratings have never dropped far below 30%, it comprises the solid, unwavering half of that percentage.[1] Though less than one sixth of the adult population, this group has a disproportionate political weight by virtue of the high electoral floor that it offers, its commitment and permanent engagement. Though composed of atomised individuals not organised in any major political structures, it is the vocal, militant core from which the gravitational pull of the far right radiates to the rest of Brazilian society.

Insisting on a contingent, synthetic link between Bolsonaro and Bolsonarismo might beg the question of why call the latter by the former's name. But following Laclau's remarks on naming as retroactively constitutive of its object, we could turn the question on its head and reply that it is exactly that contingency that justifies this choice.[2] Not, of course, that Bolsonarismo emerged fully formed the moment the name was uttered. For polemical and ontological reasons, Laclau tends to exaggerate the passivity of things and the spontaneity of leaders, minimising the horizontal ties that pull people together in favour of a shared vertical bond with the figurehead or the empty signifier. The truth tends to be more prosaic:

instead of naming as the foundational act that inaugurates a linear causal chain, a feedback process through which people begin to gravitate towards one another and represent themselves as doing so until one or more representations 'stick'. While the political operation 'at the top' was essential to giving it shape, Bolsonarismo should be seen as the coming together, under the aegis of the political factions that coalesced around Bolsonaro's campaign, of social trends that had for some time been imbued with a certain mutual tropism. And while they are certainly far from constituting a consistent theory or worldview, they have a lot of common ground to connect them.

Most accounts of Bolsonaro's rise to power tend to stay at the more superficial level of the sequence of events that led to his triumph. While it can enrich our understanding of the political decisions that produced Bolsonarismo, this approach is insufficient when it comes to identifying the deeper social shifts that were both precipitated by these decisions and made them possible. A comprehensive look at Bolsonarismo must work on more than one timescale and take into consideration at least four different levels of analysis:

- the different *discursive matrices* that came together in its formation;
- the *common grammars* that ensured these matrices' communication and mutual compatibility;
- the *affective conditions* or collective moods that gave them something to latch on to;
- the *organisational infrastructure* – encompassing churches, radio and TV shows, YouTube influencers, WhatsApp groups, Twitter bots etc. – that they rely on.

In this article, I will focus primarily on the first two, alluding to the third in the conclusion. My goal throughout will be double. Firstly, to present Bolsonarismo perspectivistically, as a phenomenon that can take on different meanings depending on the position that one occupies within it. Secondly, to highlight what is generalisable in this story. To the extent that similar conditions can be found elsewhere, that of which Bolsonaro is the name is in no way a uniquely Brazilian phenomenon.

Elective affinities

What, then, are the elements that went into the composition of Bolsonarismo? Sociologist Gabriel Feltran offers us a starting point by listing three 'discursive matrices' he calls 'police militarism' (support for law-and-order policies and the extrajudicial use of force), 'Evangelical anti-intellectualism' (rejection of science and formal education in favour of religion and personal experience), and 'entrepreneurial monetarism' (an 'entrepreneur of oneself' ethos for which precarity equals autonomy).[3] This is doubly useful, as it not only pinpoints long-term tendencies that Feltran has identified in his fieldwork in the periphery of São Paulo, but does so by resorting to the concept that Eder Sader advanced in his analysis of the early 1980s' 'social movement boom' out of which the Workers' Party (PT) emerged.[4] The same caveat raised above about Laclau applies here: to speak of 'discursive matrices' is not to claim some fundamental priority for language over embodiment or affectivity, but to propose that we think the two spheres in a circular, reciprocal relation. Language has the power to give names to things that are already vaguely sensed in everyday experience, and resonates to the extent that it does so; in so doing, however, it renders that experience communicable, enhances its publicness and reframes sensibilities accordingly.[5] Discursive matrices should therefore be considered as generative not only of statements, but of affective structures (likes and dislikes, hates and loves, objects of admiration and repulsion; what Spinoza would call *ingenia*), identification and belonging, ways of understanding and narrating oneself – all the latent conditions for what may or may not develop into fully conscious, mobilised political subjectivity.

Yet Feltran's conclusions, valuable as they are for showing the fertile ground Bolsonarismo has found among the poor, are needlessly constrained by the way he generalises (or fails to generalise) his ethnographic findings. As he himself recognises, anti-intellectualism is not exclusive to the Evangelical population and is just as visible among the predominantly Catholic upper class. As for militarism and entrepreneurialism, though they are each a single matrix shared by rich and poor, they take on such different connotations depending on class and racialisation as to result in very distinct subjective posi-

tions: it is not because people are using the same words that they are saying the same thing. In short, Feltran’s observational bias puts him at risk of (correctly) countering the idea that Bolsonarismo is merely ‘a mobilisation of the elites against the poor’ with the (incorrect) suggestion that ‘sectors of finance, agribusiness, religious and rural elites’ joined this ‘totalitarian movement’ late in the game, ‘possibly without realising what they were doing’.[6]

A formulation like this misses three crucial things about Bolsonarismo. Firstly, its character as a cross-class alliance around a few common identitarian and political reference points that have, until now, far outweighed the contradictions among the divergent interests that it brings together. Secondly, the fact that what makes this balancing act possible is both the pervasiveness of certain discursive matrices and their having enough grammar in common as to be compatible with one another. Thus, although there may be an upper- and a lower-class militarism or anti-intellectualism, the two sides can still understand and identify with one another, especially when set against what they oppose (criminality, drug use, unbridled sexuality, leniency with ‘marginals’, leftist indoctrination etc.). This means, thirdly, that we should not speak as if there were a pre-existing movement to which some groups latched on to in 2018, but rather think of what happened as the confluence of different vectors, ‘from above’ as well as ‘from below’, that already had much in common. The top 10% of the electorate were in fact the first sector Bolsonaro won over, very early on, and if the 1% did not have him as their first choice, they had no qualms about embracing him when it became clear he could win. To sum up, Bolsonarismo is a cross-class project held together at the top by politics and at the base by strong elective affinities.

This means that we can distinguish among the discursive matrices that compose it three different types: those that are restricted to a particular class or group; those that are widely shared but whose meaning remains constant across groups or classes; and those that are shared but take on different meanings depending on one’s position in the social structure. As we have seen, anti-intellectualism, militarism and entrepreneurialism all cut across strata, but the latter two belong to the third type.[7]

As regards militarism, the difference is obvious. For those living in dangerous areas, the hankering for unrestrained state violence supposes a clear demarcation between the 'working people' and the 'criminals' in the neighbourhood, with some collateral casualties in between. For those in well-off areas, policing is about protecting them from the poor, making the grey zone of potentially disposable life much larger. As for entrepreneurialism, whereas for the rich it often acts as a meritocratic narrative disguising inequality of opportunities, among the poor and much of the middle class it is more akin to what Verónica Gago has called 'neoliberalism from below'. This ambivalent dynamic, through which individuals engaged in inventing strategies of survival in an environment reconfigured by neoliberal policies come to understand themselves according to 'the logic of the microentrepreneur',[8] is in fact a major factor in the sea change that Latin American politics has seen in recent years. Largely unchallenged and often elicited by the progressive governments in the region, this 'mass self-entrepreneurship'[9] was effectively reinforced by the growth of informality and indebtedness of the Pink Tide years, making neoliberalism even more 'anchored in territories, strengthened in popular subjectivities, ... expanding and proliferating within popular economies'.[10] Phenomena like Mauricio Macri in Argentina and Bolsonaro in Brazil are partially understandable as the encounter between a radicalised version of the 1990s 'neoliberalism from above' and a neoliberalism from below that flourished during the neodevelopmentalist interlude of the 2000s, which continued to pose the market as the primary arena for the pursuit of recognition and material satisfaction. As Rosana Pinheiro-Machado and Lucia Scalco show, the empowerment produced by PT's 'inclusion through consumption' was so imbricated with the capacity to buy things that, once the economic downturn took that capacity away, many of 'the very citizens that had symbolised Brazil's rise'[11] under PT readily shifted allegiance from Lula to Bolsonaro.

Not only does Bolsonarismo openly espouse entrepreneurialism, it is an entrepreneurial phenomenon in its own right. The quintessential Bolsonarista is neither rich nor poor, but a member of a downwardly mobile 'lower upper middle class' (to borrow Orwell's turn of phrase) among which 'failed businessman' is perhaps the most common occupation. Extremely sensitive to negative fluctuations in the economy, they are by that same token especially prone to a politics of resentment that blames others for their frustrated expectations. Since 2014, many have followed a career path that went from becoming a right-wing influencer on social media to going into politics. 85% of the senators and 47% of federal representatives elected in 2018 were first-timers, most of them successfully riding on Bolsonaro's 'outsider' discourse – even though the latter had been a congressman since 1991. Among these were 22 policemen or members of the military, a retired porn actor and an heir of the Brazilian royal family.

Constructing the upstanding citizen

Despite being more socially circumscribed, two other matrices play an important role in establishing narrative connections among the others: economic libertarianism and anti-communism. Whereas anti-intellectualism, militarism and entrepreneurialism developed in parallel across social strata, in these two the direction of diffusion is more evident, going from the upper classes to the poor. Besides, their propagation is more obviously the result of coordinated action.

The seeds of the staggering resurgence of anticommunism in Brazil started being sown during PT's first term in power. At a time when the economy was booming and most people's material standards were improving, red scares manufactured with the aid of the media were among the few weapons in the opposition's armour. The contrast between these and the embracing of Lula by the international establishment produced a cognitive dissonance that conspiracy theories about a global leftist conspiracy would subsequently help solve. It was the social media-fuelled spread of the latter that operated the shift from Cold War discourse as a tool in parliamentary struggle to anticommunism as an overarching geopolitical narrative pitting Trump and Bolsonaro as the Asterix and Obelix of the struggle against 'cultural Marxism-driven economic globalisation'.[12] The very fact that no concrete threat existed only made this discourse more efficient, as its 'abstractness' meant that 'anything that somehow [did] not fit [could be] subsumed under [an] all-purpose term' like 'communism' or 'globalism'.[13]

While market libertarianism is in one sense merely the theoretical counterpart to entrepreneurialism, it merits independent consideration because of its importance as a rallying point for a young, university-educated middle class that played a protagonist role in the events leading to Bolsonaro's election. This too was a process that began shortly after PT came to power, the creation of Instituto Millenium in 2005 being a major landmark. Funded by some of the most powerful financial, industrial and media groups in the country, this think tank worked to popularise ultraliberal ideas and, alongside players like Instituto Mises Brasil (founded in 2007), contributed to a veritable editorial boom in the field. (A boom in conservative literature was happening around the same time.) This created the environment in which young, media-savvy ultraliberal activists started to organise, drawing on grants from international funders like the Cato Institute.[14] The most important of these groups is the Students for Liberty-trained Movimento Brasil Livre (Free Brazil Movement, or MBL), which emerged during the June 2013 protests as the right-wing answer to Movimento Passe Livre (Free Fare Movement, or MPL). Two years later, MBL were key to organising the marches calling for the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff; in 2018, they elected seven congressmen.

At first, this sector's selling point was the cosmopolitan, socially liberal attitude that set them apart from the traditional right: 'liberal in economics and in social mores' was how they described themselves. As power beckoned, however, they increasingly converged with social conservatives, not only finding areas of cooperation but adopting some of their discourses and tactics. Conversely, their newfound clout was one of the factors that pulled Bolsonaro, whose economic views had previously appeared to lean statist, towards an ultraliberal agenda. Despite the former army captain's unequivocal authoritarian tendencies, they continue to support him with varying degrees of enthusiasm, invoking a distinction between the government's 'technical' (economic) and 'ideological' areas as an excuse.

The most universal of these discursive matrices, anti-corruption, illustrates the power of libertarianism and anticommunism in tying Bolsonarismo's different strands together. In Brazil, corruption has long worked in the public imaginary as a sort of meta-problem, the magical cause which, once eliminated, would cure all other ills. In this account, the weight of structural constraints and differences of political orientation are entirely disregarded in favour of a voluntaristic, individualised vision of politics: the country would be prosperous and there would be money for everything if only there were honest individuals in charge.

Although Brazilian elites have used anti-corruption rhetoric to destabilise progressive governments in the past, until recently it was widely understood that misappropriation of public funds was endemic to the political profession. Having usually been far from positions of power, left-wing parties were, if anything, deemed more trustworthy. Yet the vast institutional sleaze uncovered in 2014 by the now-famous Operation Car Wash presented libertarians and anticommunists with a unique opportunity to promote a new narrative. It combined a Hayekian mistrust of social justice as '[amounting] simply to the protection of entrenched interests'[15] with the notion that the left's universal modus operandi is to buy off interest groups such as minorities and artists in order to install corrupt totalitarian regimes. The sheer size of the schemes Car Wash revealed thus functioned as evidence not of PT's definitive incorporation into the country's political elite, but of how far they had advanced in their plan to 'turn Brazil into Venezuela' – exactly as the right had been warning they would for a decade.

It helped that one of the largest corruption scandals in the country's history unfolded in parallel with one of its worst economic crises ever, indelibly connecting the two in most people's minds. If there was a recession, the thought went, this was not due to bad economic policy or a global slump, but to an unprecedentedly large attack on the state's kitty. It became easier on this basis to cement the association between left-wing governments, sleaze and economic inefficiency, even though the scandal actually involved all mainstream parties. The political advantages of this account were obvious. In one fell swoop, it turned what was deemed to be a universal, endemic problem into a particularly left-wing vice; it painted even PT's cautious reformism as part of a communist threat, making anything but the most pro-market libertarianism potentially suspicious; it legitimised opposition to progressive policies by reframing it as resistance against a slide towards tyranny; and it nurtured a feeling of imminent danger that created the demand for urgent, radical action.

The final element in the Bolsonarista constellation is another discursive matrix that plays an important role in tying together the rest: social conservatism. Like anticommunism, it came from the fringes of the political spectrum and was progressively mainstreamed by politicians and vehicles interested in denting PT's popularity. Unlike anticommunism or market libertarianism, it did not spread downwards, but was already well established across all classes. Spurred by the advances made by feminists and the LGBTQ+ community in the last decade on the one hand, and by fabricated moral panics on the other, it too relied on a sense of urgent threat to expand. Growing steadily over the Lula years, the defence of 'family values' proved to be a force to be reckoned with the 'gay kit' episode in 2011.[16] By 2015 it was so strong that many invoked it as a reason to support the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, one congressman in particular claiming to be acting against 'programmes that aim to make children change sex and learn sex at school'.

As Isabela Kalil has noted, Bolsonarismo's greatest achievement was to make all these different elements – militarism, anti-intellectualism, entrepreneurialism, anticommunism, market libertarianism, anticorruption discourse, social conservatism – converge around a single figure, the 'upstanding citizen' (*cidadão de bem*).[17] If there is an empty signifier that represents the Bolsonarista base to itself, it is that.[18] On the other side of the antagonistic frontier, the concept of *mamata* (from *mamar*, 'to suckle') does the same work when it comes to identifying the enemy. Meaning 'easy life' or 'undue advantage', *mamata* can apply to anything from perceived leniency with criminals to the exorbitant salaries of politicians and the judiciary; from labour rights to the supposedly charmed existence of artists and academics; from the job stability of civil servants to sexual freedom and the questioning of traditional gender roles; and from the misuse of public funds to affirmative action at universities. Its capacity to establish equivalences between basic rights and elite privileges, and to present the former in terms of the latter, is key to building the class alliance on which Bolsonarismo depends. Its constitution of a continuum between private and public morality allows it to be the *point de capiton* that makes changes in societal attitudes resonate with rising crime rates, corruption, progressive social policy and even contemporary art as gathering evidence of a single process of moral decadence that it behoves the upstanding citizenry to stop.

It bears repeating that, although these discursive matrices overlap at various points, not every Bolsonarista (let alone Bolsonaro voter) subscribes to all of them with the same intensity, or at all. Not only are there inconsistencies between them, none of them is fully consistent either. This matters little, as the power of the metanarratives that establish their connection lies in association more than logic, and coherence derives less from any actual content than from the feeling of being on the same side in a struggle.[19] Whether one believes or not in all that is said about the enemy is less important than believing that there is an enemy and it must be defeated. And precisely, what these metanarratives promise is more than just certainty amidst change and sensory overload. The perception of imminent existential threat that they cultivate intensifies subjective commitment, presents their adherents in a heroic light and frames politics as a fight to the death in which all means are justified in advance.

A common grammar

Although *mamata* has a very Brazilian flavour, the operation it makes possible is the far right's quintessential conjuring trick everywhere: promoting the confusion between anxiety around the loss *of rights* and the fear of losing *privileges*. This is what has allowed it in recent years to gather the support of both those sectors that have few material concerns but resent the advances made by some groups, and those that are haunted by falling standards and the prospect of no longer enjoying rights they once had. In that, it was evidently abetted by the fall-out from the 2008 crisis coming on the back of a 'progressive neoliberalism' that combined a 'plutocratic economic program' that left millions of people behind with a 'liberal-meritocratic politics of recognition' and mostly symbolic improvements for some minorities.[20] The concomitance of severe losses for some and modest gains for others is what helps the far right convince the 'losers' of globalisation that if they are being deprived of *rights*, it is because others – women, migrants, ethnic groups, LGBTQ+ people etc. – are gaining *privileges* off their backs.

It is this triadic structure of right populism – not 'the people' versus 'the elite', but the people against an elite that unduly favours some other group[21] – that explains how, in the United States, a billionaire could appear as the candidate of the common man against an 'establishment' consisting of Hollywood actors, newspaper columnists and graduate students on Twitter. It also helps us make sense of the confluence, particularly sharp in Brazil, of social conservatism and no-holds-barred neoliberalism. When the loss of certain privileges (white, male, heteronormative etc.) is associated with the conquest of rights by others (affirmative action, for example), the desire to see the status quo restored finds a natural ally in the rejection of redistributive policies.

Not that this confluence should surprise us too much. In places like Brazil and the United States, the coming together of social conservatism and neoliberalism has long been prepared, on the one hand, by the 'prosperity gospel' of Neopentecostal churches, which provides divine justification for the accumulation of wealth and 'reinforces the Calvinist tenet of individual responsibility for material success'.[22] And, on the other, by a 'neoliberalism from above' that has never ceased to invest the family as disciplinary institution, counterweight to the market's disaggregating tendencies, safety net that could take on functions previously exercised by the state (education, health, well-being), and part of a *dispositif* for the privatisation of risk.[23] Ultimately, however, what Bolsonarismo helps us see is that, if neoliberalism and neoconservatism can be relatively easily welded together by politics, it is because they share to a large extent the same moral grammar.

Once again, to speak of 'grammar' is not to stay at the level of language only. A grammar, following Wittgenstein, is part of a form of life. Thus, if the way one lives conditions what one can say about the world, what one can say about the world provides the grounds for decisions and institutions that condition the way one lives.[24] Indeed, the moral grammar of the far right at once reflects how its adherents see the world and demands that the world be remade according to that vision. Its key elements are *individualism*, *punitivism* and *the valorisation of order above the law*.

Ideas like self-reliance and becoming an 'entrepreneur of oneself' are of course among the highest values posited by neoliberal discourse. But in a world reconfigured by these ideas, they are also essential to the strategies required to navigate relationships, institutions and work, and integral to how individuals perceive themselves. As safety nets shrink and uncertainty grows, the sheer 'strain of risk-bearing'[25] forces people to internalise the idea that they are solely responsible for their own fate. By rendering invisible both the interdependencies that sustain individual trajectories and the structural constraints that hold them back, this individualistic grammar voids the notion of a social space beyond the immediate private sphere: there are only individuals and (at best) their families, as someone famously put it. This not only deprives people of the language in which to address structural injustice, but induces them to interpret positive changes in their economic environment as their own achievement and structural demands as special pleading: 'if they have to battle through life alone, then everyone else should too'.[26]

Perversely, individualism is an ideal that works as well in success (narrated as heroic self-realisation) as it does in failure (in a 'therapeutic' mode that restores dignity by locating emotional development in adversity).[27] In our societies, individual sovereignty is the site of 'cruel optimism'[28] *par excellence*, the frustration of its expectations only making its grip stronger. Inadequacy is therefore less likely to lead to a reformulation of the ideal than to a doubling down that can be turned inward as self-aggression and outward as resentment and negative solidarity.[29]

This is where the grammars of individualism and punitivism intersect. In a world where everyone feels they are (and ought to be) out on their own, non-conformity is seen as eschewing personal responsibility or seeking special treatment, and therefore worthy of punishment.[30] This tendency is compounded by the increasingly punitive features of post-2008 (in Brazil, post-2014) neoliberal governmentality.[31] If neoliberalism has managed to hold on since, despite a huge loss of legitimacy, it is because the disciplinary mechanisms that sustain it have become starker, even as – or precisely because – the normative claims behind them have become more suspect. What many failed to appreciate a decade ago is that crisis itself can be a highly effective source of discipline, given its power to rescind alternatives, mobilise subjective investment, intensify economic coercion and reactivate neoliberalism's founding myth of being the rational, technocratic cure for the excesses of a previous period. This metanarrative proves that the retributive element in neoliberalism is not entirely new and has in fact been there from the start. Yet what is different now is that calls to tighten the belts come with only the faintest prospect of ever loosening them again, and whereas sacrifice was once a means to a better life, it increasingly appears as end in itself: the naked imperative to adapt to a diminishing horizon. This has reached a paroxysm with the Covid-19 pandemic, when the official discourse in places like Brazil and the United States has *literally* been that people have to choose between the economy or their lives.

As a product of internalised discipline, punitivism is highly respectful of established authority, social roles and divisions; organised crime and social movements are potentially equally loathsome and despised. Among the rich as well as the poor, the punitive animus is directed against those at the base of the social pyramid more than those at the top, whose transgressions can be shrugged off as part of their reward for having 'made it'.

It is here that individualism and punitivism intersect with a notion of order as something above, and ultimately against, the law. Many have identified this as a founding trait of Brazilian culture of which Bolsonaro is merely the latest, obscene flower.[32] It goes back to the early days of the country's formation, when local landowners were at once representatives of state power and the most powerful men in their areas, fostering the confusion between public and private interests.[33] The agrarian, slave-holding structure of the plantation economy not only divided society into individuals endowed with rights and pieces of common property, but meant that even free men often owed their fortunes to attracting the favours of the property-owning elite. This meant that liberal discourse and a modern state apparatus developed not by supplanting but by appeasing, and often providing cover for, this archaic structure of command.[34] Even after the abolition of slavery – which Brazil was one of the last countries to enact – the permanent and assured exercise of one's rights was a privilege reserved to those of a certain social standing. Punishment, conversely, was certain only for those whose status did not exempt them from observing the same rules as everyone else.

In a society in which the guarantee of equality before the law is a privilege, the demand for order is thus usually not about applying the law, but about revoking the rights of those who do not 'deserve' them and granting special treatment to those who do. This was visible in the way the media and the public cheered Operation Car Wash on through its numerous procedural infringements, which have exposed its legal results to revision and annulment even if its political effects are irreversible.[35] It is also visible in four themes dear to Bolsonarismo: the call for 'human rights for the right humans',[36] not criminals; the flexibilisation of gun laws, which amounts to privatising the sovereign power over death; the dismantling of environmental protections, understood as obstacles to entrepreneurship; and the crusade against speed cameras and traffic fines, seen as impinging on car owners' liberties.[37]

On the one hand, the pre-modern logic that places the right to flaunt common rules as the greatest right of all fits in well with the libertarian absolutisation of individual freedom. This was made explicit by Bolsonaro's rejection of movement restrictions or mask enforcement during the pandemic, which he has since followed on by insisting that 'nobody can force anyone to take the vaccine' once it is available. On the other hand, as this type of order supposes not the formal equality of laws but the arbitrary exercise of authority, it combines perfectly with the defence of a 'private life of power'[38] premised on a traditional distribution of roles between men and women, white and non-white, straight and not straight, etc. As Wendy Brown has noted, nihilistic revanchism against the inroads made by oppressed groups 'releases the will to power not only in subjects, but in traditional values themselves, baldly revealing the privilege and entitlement they encode'.[39] 'Those who can, rule; those who have sense, obey', as the Brazilian saying goes.

This too is a moral grammar, but one indexed less on codes than on the power of a 'strict father' to lay down the law.[40] This confluence of the pre- and the post-modern, traditional authority and the neoliberal voiding of the social, creates the basis on which the ruling elite and the excluded can meet. It is a meeting between those who have given up on waiting for the democratising promises of modernity and those no longer even nominally interested in pursuing them; those who have ceased to expect accountability and equality, and those unwilling to make concessions to such values.

It is in this sense that Bolsonarismo is the scar of a democracy that has failed to live up to its concept, as per the Adornian aphorism I have chosen as the epigraph for this text. Bolsonarismo converges around the paradoxical dream of a state of nature presided over by a paternal figure at once strict (with those who are not 'upstanding citizens') and permissive (with those who are); in which authority is both exercised decisively from above and devolved to local powers that are free to act in their own sphere of influence (the pastor, the landowner, the cop, the *pater familias*, the crime or paramilitary boss); in which conflicts of jurisdiction are nonetheless unlikely, because 'everyone knows their place'. The supreme leader thus really is at once a 'father of the horde' and a 'great little man'.[41] If he is entitled to a surplus of obscenity, it is not because of any intrinsic quality, but simply because he 'made it to the top'. He is therefore free to use his position in his own favour, *as any of us would*. ('If I can give my son steak, I will', as Bolsonaro said of his intention to make his middle son the Brazilian ambassador to the United States.)

The problem, of course, is that such a dream cannot work for everyone. If dog-eat-dog is made the rule, dog *will* eat dog, and the strong will feed on the weak. It is at this point of convergence, then, that Bolsonarismo (and even more so Bolsonaro's election) reveals itself as a huge misunderstanding. Whereas some (mostly poor) supporters tend to see him as the sheriff who will restore respect, others (mostly middle class) perceive him as a self-made chancer who will make life easier for go-getters like himself. The elite, finally, identify him above all with that figure from the plantation whose function was historically superseded by the army and the police. Unable to find a viable candidate in their own ranks, they chose to elect the *overseer*; and as long as he fulfils his duty of containing demands from below while ensuring even more draconian conditions for capital accumulation, he can manage his political capital as he pleases. A dangerous bargain, to be sure, as the overseer is given free rein to combine this political capital with the armed support of overseers like him in the police, paramilitary and armed forces.

Characteristic as it may be of Brazilian society, the confusion between order and law is hardly exclusive to it, and neither are any of the other elements considered here. Bolsonarismo is not reducible to either a national atavism or a simple repetition of historical fascism. It is a very contemporary tragedy, the conditions for which are given far and wide today, and tend to worsen as political and economic inequality grows and the effects of climate change intensify. Some form of overseer capitalism may well be part and parcel of that 'Brazilianisation' with which the developed world is menaced from time to time.

Dark moods: the rationality of the irrational

Among the thorniest problems in analyses of historical fascism is the interplay of deceit and desire, rationality and irrationality at its heart. To what extent were people duped into doing certain things? To what extent did they actually come to desire them – and how conscious were they of doing so? Were irrational justifications such as conspiracy theories mere attempts to rationalise anti-social urges run rampant? Was stirring and performing these urges merely a cover for base interests and calculations, such as appropriating the wealth of persecuted groups? Although it is not hard to notice that there is a certain 'phoniness' about fascists – a category that 'applies to the leaders as well as to the act of identification on the part of the masses'[42] – it is not always easy to tell who is faking what to whom, and when.

Thinking through these questions demands that we consider the discursive matrices and grammars on which the far right relies in relation to the affective conditions that give them something to latch on to: the shared affects or moods that enhance receptivity to far right politics and make it appear as a plausible answer in a concrete situation. Given that the recent resurgence of far right politics is a global phenomenon, we should expect to find the same affective conditions in several different countries, and be able to trace them back to processes taking place globally. And indeed, everywhere we look today we will find feelings of humiliation in the face of joblessness, underemployment, poverty and debt; fear of losing one's place in the world; wounded male pride; resentment against groups perceived as benefiting from transformations occurred in the last decades; abandonment and being taken for granted; and the diffuse, unfocused anti-systemic sentiments that follow from that. It is not hard to see the processes set in motion by neoliberal globalisation and accelerated by the 2008 crisis at the root of all of these. Yet there are other components to our present ambient mood that are less salient because the changes to which they respond unfold on a timescale that is longer and less immediately obvious. Among these, I would like to focus on one in particular that provides an interesting angle on the issue of phoniness; I will call it *denialism*.

Many have already drawn connections between the resurgence of the far right and denialism – about the holocaust, the crimes of the military dictatorship in Brazil, the climate crisis.[43] What I am calling by this name does not, however, refer exclusively to the lies that those who deny the existence of such things consciously spread. It also involves the public that consumes them and what attracts this public to them in the first place. My intuition here is that the state we describe as 'being in denial' – an unconscious attempt to protect oneself from a traumatic experience or thought by refusing to recognise its reality, or what Freud called *disavowal* – creates a demand for the commodity that conscious "denialists" supply. A booming market for the latter should therefore lead us to suspect an increase in the former. This would mean that it is no coincidence that a sizeable fraction of the Brazilian upper class would turn to those who blamed social conflict on 'cultural Marxism' when the modest gains made by historically marginalised groups forced them to confront their place and role in the country's extremely unequal social structure. Disgusted by the sight of his face in a mirror, Caliban chose to believe those who said that the mirror was broken. Likewise, it is no coincidence that the rise of leaders who eschew even the usual insincere platitudes about the environment comes after states and markets have failed to adequately address global warming for decades. It may be easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, but it is much less costly psychologically to just wish its reality away.

Of course, the picture that the far right paints of the present is far from rosy. On the contrary, it is a narrative of war, of slow-building civilisational conflict finally coming to a head. But this is exactly where its perverse rationality lies. For while it on the one hand meets the demand for disavowal by fabulating easier problems with easier solutions, it does not fail, on the other, to acknowledge just how bad things are. In so doing, it speaks to the atmospheric dread of a world haunted by climate change, a stagnating economy, precarisation, the lack of democratic oversight and global pandemics much better than most well-meaning liberals would. It may well be that one of the reasons why Bolsonaro's popularity went up among the poor despite his disastrous handling of Covid-19 was that framing the situation as a choice between life and the economy was, for them, *objectively true*. It showed him as more in touch with their reality than anyone telling them to stay at home when they had no option but to go work.

This is not all there is to this rationality. In what I am calling denialism, disavowing the enormity of the challenges facing humankind is made all the more necessary by the conviction that no major structural transformations are possible. Now, if none of the big variables can change – because a real challenge to those at the top is inconceivable – all that is left for those at the bottom is to fight each other for ever-diminishing scraps. And this is exactly what the alternative reality that the far right puts in place of the disavowed traumatic content prepares its adherents for. By locating the source of the problem in the misappropriation of resources by various others (countries, ethnicities, religions, cultures, genders, sexualities) and framing the distributive conflict as a war, it provides justification for going after the weak and inoculates against the psychological burden of any excesses one might perform or support in the future. It is a '*conservative politics of antagonistic reproduction*', as Alberto Toscano aptly summarised it, in a world in which social reproduction tends to become ever more antagonistic.[44]

In denialism, then, we find what is ultimately the greatest, most ironic misunderstanding on which the far right relies: the fact that it seals an alliance between those gearing up for surviving in worsening conditions and an elite increasingly at ease with the idea that 'the earth no longer has room enough for them and for everyone else'.[45]

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Notes

1. The estimate was made by statistician Reginaldo Prandi based on polls from the end of June 2020. Reginaldo Prandi, 'Adeptos Fiéis a Bolsonaro São 15% da População Adulta, Indica Datafolha', *Folha de São Paulo*, July 2 2020, www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/07/adeptos-fieis-a-bolsonaro-sao-15-da-populacao-adulta-indica-datafolha.shtml. Bolsonaro's popularity has remained fairly constant even though rejection of his administration has grown, reaching a peak at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, when Brazil had over 1,000 deaths a day between early June and August. What changed in the meantime was the social profile of his support, the losses incurred among the upper class being recouped by gains made among the poor. Against most expectations, at the time of writing Bolsonaro enjoys the highest approval ratings since the start of his term (37%). Igor Gielow, 'Aprovação a Bolsonaro Sobe e É a Melhor Desde o Início do Mandato, Diz Datafolha', *Folha de São Paulo*, August 13 2020, www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/08/aprovacao-a-bolsonaro-sobe-e-e-a-melhor-desde-o-inicio-do-mandato-diz-datafolha.shtml.

2. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 101ff.

3. See Gabriel Feltran, "'The Revolution We Are Living"', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 10:1 (2020), 12.

4. See Eder Sader, *Quando Novos Personagens Entraram em Cena. Experiências e Lutas dos Trabalhadores da Grande São Paulo, 1970-1980* (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2010).

5. We could thus say, misappropriating Raymond Williams somewhat, that 'discursive matrices' and 'structures of feeling' always presuppose one another. That would not be a problem for Sader, who speaks of 'demands about social reproduction and symbolic recognition' as enjoying a 'virtual existence', that is, actualised in conscience once they are articulated in language and become objects of reflection. See Sader, *Quando Novos Personagens*, 58.

6. Gabriel Feltran, 'Formas Elementares da Vida Politica. Sobre o Movimento Totalitario no Brasil (2013-)', *Novos Estudos* (2020) novosestudos.com.br/formas-elementares-da-vida-politica-sobre-o-movimento-totalitario-no-brasil-2013

7. As for anti-intellectualism, if its meaning does not change, its source and reference points do: among the upper class, religious authority often takes a back seat to contempt for knowledge without immediate economic utility and the conspiracy theories spread by YouTube celebrities like far-right guru (and avowed Bolsonaro influence) Olavo de Carvalho.

8. Verónica Gago, *Neoliberalism from Below: Popular Pragmatics and Baroque Economies*, trans. Liz Mason-Deese (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 36.

9. Ibid., 6.

10. Ibid., 11.

11. Rosana Pinheiro-Machado and Lucia Scalco, 'From Hope to Hate: The Rise of Conservative Subjectivity in Brazil', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 10:1 (2020), 21–22, https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/708627

12. This is how obscure diplomatic kook-turned-Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo defines 'globalism'. See Ernesto Araújo, 'About', *Metapolítica Brasil* blog, https://www.metapoliticabrasil.com/about. For a well-informed look into the role of YouTube in the rise of Bolsonarismo, see Max Fisher and Amanda Taub, 'How YouTube Radicalized Brazil', *The New York Times*, August 11 (2019), https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/11/world/americas/youtube-brazil.html.

13. Theodor Adorno, *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), 19; translation modified.

14. Camila Rocha, 'Think Tanks Ultraliberais e Nova Direita Brasileira', *Le Monde Diplomatique Brasil* 124 (2017), diplomatique.org.br/think-tanks-ultraliberais-e-nova-direita-brasileira.
15. Friedrich von Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty: A New Statement of the Liberal Principles of Justice and Political Economy*, Volume 2 (London: Routledge, 1998), 97.
16. See 'Religion and Politics in Contemporary Brazil' by Carolina Evangelista in this issue of *Radical Philosophy* 2.09.
17. Isabela Kalil, 'Quem São e no que Acreditam os Eleitores de Jair Bolsonaro', Research Report, Fundação Escola de Sociologia e Política de São Paulo (2018).
18. This is corroborated by Débora Salles' analysis of the discourse of the Bolsonaro campaign on Twitter using a methodology developed by Sara Walton and Brownyn Boon to apply Laclau and Mouffe's insights to data analysis. Débora Salles, *The Twitter Effect. The Politics of Tweeting During the 2018 Brazilian Presidental Election*, Doctoral Thesis, Graduate Programme in Information Science, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (2020).
19. Among the different types of Bolsonaro voter identified by Kalil there were, for instance, the poor people who defended a 'minimal state', which they explained as minimal intervention from the state in religious or moral matters rather than the reduction of public services. See Kalil, 'Quem São e no que Acreditam', 20.
20. Nancy Fraser, 'From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump – and Beyond', *American Affairs* 1:4 (2017), americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/11/progressive-neoliberalism-trump-beyond.
21. See John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016), 10.
22. Jason Hackworth, *Faith Based: Religious Neoliberalism and the Politics of Welfare in the United States* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 45. This is in fact an important component in the constitution of a 'neoliberalism from below', which Gago curiously overlooks.
23. See Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).
24. This is what Foucault had in mind when he wrote that 'a society made up of enterprise-units is at once the principle of decipherment linked to liberalism and its programming for the rationalisation of a society and an economy'. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), 225.
25. Jennifer Silva, *Coming Up Short: Working Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 155.
26. Ibid., 150.
27. On the therapeutic narrative, see ibid., 114ff.
28. See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
29. On the concept of negative solidarity, see Jason Read, 'Negative Solidarity. The Affective Economy of Austerity', *Unemployed Negativity* blog, October 24 2019, http://www.unemployednegativity.com/2019/10/negative-solidarity-affective-economy.html.
30. On the combination of class anxiety, meritocracy and punitivism among Lula voters turned Bolsonaristas, see Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, 'From Hope to Hate', 27.
31. See Will Davies, 'The New Neoliberalism', *New Left Review* 101 (2016), 121–34.
32. For an overview, see Tales Ab'Saber, 'Ordem e Violência no Brasil', in Bernardo Kucinski et al., *Bala Perdida: a Violência Policial no Brasil e os Desafios para sua Superação* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2015), 97–102.
33. See, for instance, Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda, *Roots of Brazil*, trans. G. Harvey Summ (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2012).
34. See Roberto Schwarz, 'Misplaced Ideas: Literature and Society in Late Nineteenth-Century Brazil', *Misplaced Ideas. Essays on Brazilian Culture*, ed. and trans. John Gledson (London: Verso, 1992), 19–32.
35. It is worth remembering that Bolsonaro only became the frontrunner in 2018 after Lula was ruled out of the race. The Car Wash Operation judge who convicted Lula, Sergio Moro, went on to become the Minister of Justice, but resigned a year later, accusing Bolsonaro of trying to interfere with criminal investigations against his oldest son.
36. This is a slight détournement of the slogan *direitos humanos para humanos direitos* ('human rights for "straight", as in "upstanding", humans').
37. '[T]o "respect" connotes an option, and is therefore the more appropriate word for those who think themselves as superior'; "to obey" is compulsory, and is therefore much more appropriate for those who have learnt to think themselves or as classified and thought as inferior'. Roberto DaMatta, *Fé em Deus e Pé na Tábua. Ou Como e Por que o Trânsito Enlouquece no Brasil* (São Paulo: Rocco, 2010), 69. Roberto Andrés connects the growth of this attitude to the 255% rise in the number of motorised vehicles during PT's administrations, which the party held up as evidence of success in the fight against inequality. Roberto Andrés, 'Jeitinho sobre Rodas', *Piauí* 154 (2019), 32–35.
38. Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), second edition, 10ff.
39. Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 173.
40. On the strict (versus 'nurturant') father as metaphorical model for conservative politics, see George Lakoff, *The Political Mind: A Cognitive Scientist's Guide to Your Brain and Its Politics* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 77–81.
41. See Theodor Adorno, 'Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda', in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gephardt (London: Continuum, 1997), 125–8.
42. Adorno, 'Freudian Theory', 136.
43. See, for example, Déborah Danowski, *Negacionismos* (São Paulo: n-1, 2018).
44. Alberto Toscano, 'Notes on Late Fascism', *Historical Materialism* blog, April 2 2017, http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/notes-late-fascism#_ftn25. (Italics in the original.)
45. Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 1.