

# RESENTMENTS, CONSPIRACIES AND MESSIANISMS IN BOLSONARO'S DISRUPTIVE GOVERNANCE<sup>1</sup>

*RESSENTIMENTOS, CONSPIRAÇÕES E MESSIANISMOS NA GOVERNANÇA  
DISRUPTIVA BOLSONARISTA*

*RESENTIMIENTOS, CONSPIRACIONES Y MESSIANISMOS EN LA GOBERNANZA  
DISRUPTIVA BOLSONARISTA*

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## ABSTRACT

This article seeks to analyze the recent Brazilian situation from the perspective of multiple articulations based on polarization and strategies that have made disinformation, the advance of conspiracy theories, resentment, fear and messianism explicit. Through an epistemological approach to the intricacies of rhetoric and authoritarian power, this exhibition reveals an ideology of values that make explicit and engender the violation of rights, intolerance and exclusion. The results indicate that Bolsonaro's disruptive governance has been able to reinforce a power project through conduct capable of spreading hatred and evoking dichotomies, appeals to ignorance and generalizations in an eloquent and strategic way.

**Keywords:** power; resentment; rhetoric; messianisms; hatred.

## RESUMO

Este artigo busca analisar a conjuntura brasileira recente na perspectiva das múltiplas articulações pautadas na polarização e em estratégias que explicitaram a desinformação, o avanço de teorias da conspiração, o ressentimento, medo e os messianismos. Por meio de uma abordagem epistemológica dos meandros da retórica e do poder autoritário, esta exposição revela uma ideologia de valores que explicita e engendra a violação de direitos, a intolerância e a exclusão. Os resultados indicam que a governança disruptiva bolsonarista postulou um projeto de poder por meio de condutas capazes de disseminar ódio e evocar dicotomias, apelos à ignorância e generalizações de forma eloquente e estratégica.

**Palavras-chave:** poder; ressentimento; retórica; messianismos; ódio.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo pretende analizar la coyuntura brasileña reciente desde la perspectiva de las múltiples interrelaciones basadas en la polarización y en estrategias que han puesto de

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manifiesto la desinformación, el avance de las teorías de la conspiración, el resentimiento, el miedo y los mesianismos. A través de un enfoque epistemológico de los entresijos de la retórica y el poder autoritario, este trabajo revela una ideología de valores que explicita y genera la violación de derechos, la intolerancia y la exclusión. Los resultados indican que la gobernanza disruptiva bolsonarista postuló un proyecto de poder mediante conductas capaces de difundir el odio y evocar dicotomías, apelaciones a la ignorancia y generalizaciones de manera elocuente y estratégica.

**Palabras clave:** poder; resentimiento; retórica; mesianismos; odio.

## Introduction

Historically, representative democracy corresponds to the domain of demands that seek interlocution through a regime anchored in contracts established between subjects based on an interpretative and persuasive process that provides a conjunction with the object that places them in relation. For the politician, power. For the voter, the fulfillment of promises. Guided by the agreement of wills, politics makes up a “classic” combination in its basic program based on the principle of intentionality. In this sense, it ends up tutoring auxiliary programs that manifest themselves as emotional and affective bonds cultivated in the contact between politicians and their voters.

The figure of the leader who embodies the “man of the people”, “true”, “sincere” and, at the same time, capable of appearing “firm” and “strong”, does not entirely define the populist characters of the 21st century. Alongside this image, there is another role that some political protagonists play with equal ease: that of the individual who is alien to the vestiges of institutionality required by the position they hold. They are often, as in the case of the Brazilian candidate defeated in the last major elections in 2022, “grotesque” and do not hesitate to flirt with the ridiculous and the aberrant (Moura; Corbelini, 2019).

The persuasive power that political leaders exert over the masses, both through their behavior and their use of rhetorical strategies, has already been outlined by Aristotle (2005a). Adherence to populist ideas does not exclude the relevance of the argumentative dimension supported by dubious or misleading information. This is what Jair Bolsonaro has shown in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic by putting rhetoric at the service of disinformation through speeches and publications made on digital platforms. Manifestations that were not only reproduced by supporters, but also echoed by the media more broadly (Campos, 2020).

The “rhetoric of disinformation” corresponds to a set of discursive strategies adopted to convince the population. In the case of Brazil, especially in the context of the pandemic crisis, this reality has been amplified through precepts based on denialism and anti-scientific ideology, with fake news and fallacious arguments. From a more direct perspective, this is a type of deception that researchers describe as cunning because it aims to deceive individuals (Rocha, 2021).

According to linguist José Luiz Fiorin (2014), rhetoric is generally concerned with the means of persuasion created by discourse, as well as the effects it has on listeners. For this reason, the relationship between this type of rhetoric and democracy is quite subtle. One of the characteristics of the political regime, however, is the existence of a public space in which opinions are contested and appeals are made for individuals to voluntarily subscribe to the ideas proposed. As pointed out (Fiorin, 2014), discourses are instances of struggle between social voices and, therefore, the privileged place of politics.

For French researcher and professor emeritus at Tel Aviv University in Israel, Ruth Amossy (2020, p. 11), “in the intersubjective relationship, effective speech is not only that which manipulates the other, but also that which shares reasoning and questioning”. For the author, “rhetoric” and “argumentation” are interchangeable. Taking this assumption into account, rhetoric can be thought of as a set of rules on which a method is evoked to determine the best elements of persuasion, which can be exploited consciously or non-consciously.

This approach, therefore, seeks to provide a conjunctural analysis of the Brazilian reality from the perspective of the tensions and implications of a supposed cultural and ideological supremacy engendered by the Bolsonaro government. With a controversial epistemological notion, the premises outlined by Bolsonaro's rhetoric reproduce an environment in which individuals have been subjected to a massive cognitive and emotional burden. The aim of the article, at first, is to reflect on issues related to the contours of rhetoric and persuasion. Next, we seek to broaden our understanding of resentment, fear and hatred. The third part advocates an ideology underlined by arguments of authority, apocalyptic chaos, conspiracies and messianism. In the last section, there is an overview of issues related to generalizations, dichotomies and constant appeals to ignorance.

## Scrutinizing the Meanings of Rhetoric and Persuasion

Although it is often associated with a discursive practice or the aesthetic quality of discourse, rhetoric is much more than a style. It is not reduced, as it was at one point in its history, to a catalog of figures of speech that correspond to elements that seek to influence the way someone thinks, feels or acts. Anyone who sets out to carry out a rhetorical analysis sees the way in which persuasion takes place as their main object. For this reason, the concern is more focused on the argumentative processes directed at an audience by presenting justifications that motivate certain conclusions, sometimes not true, but well articulated. They are capable of supporting the ideas presented in such a way as to gain the support of the interlocutors (Hirschman, 1992).

Rhetorical analysis focuses on the text only insofar as it “reveals the argumentative organization of persuasion”, showing how it convinces us of the validity of its point of view (Mateus, 2018, p. 189-190). Throughout history, persuasive practices have been shaped by the means of communication available. The possibility of the speaker addressing several audiences at once, in different times and places, has produced what Portuguese researcher Samuel Mateus (2018) has called “mediatized rhetoric”. A persuasion organized around the massification and standardization of speeches broadcast by large audiences, such as television.

The emergence of digital platforms, by allowing greater segmentation and personalization of audiences, has made it easier for speakers to adapt to the audience, paving the way for a rhetoric of disinformation supported, among other things, by confirmation bias. People tend to believe what exacerbates or confirms their worldview and values. Whatever the means employed, the rhetoric of persuasion ultimately consists of an inducement to believe in something or a coming to do that corresponds in semiotic terms to a regime of manipulation (Perelman, 2004).

The way in which disinformation has sustained political interactions under the aegis of manipulation leads us to think, according to linguist Algirdas Julien Greimas (2014, p. 124), that the concept of truth has increasingly been replaced by paradigms of effectiveness. Truth is an effect of meaning. It consists of making things seem true, which does not depend so much on a correspondence between the discourse and the “real world”, but more on a persuasive and interpretive act sustained by the exchange of beliefs and values.

The construction of what is true necessarily refers to the way in which we seek to persuade. The rhetorical dynamic consists of this “transformation, by the speaker, of an opinion into an argument according to the particularities of the audience to which it is addressed” (Mateus, 2018, p. 91). From this perspective, it is necessary to observe at least two ways of engaging in persuasion: argument and appeal. Every argument ultimately seeks to prove a “thesis” or reach a conclusion based on certain propositions that are considered plausible.

An argument is considered valid when the premises that support the conclusion can be assessed as logical and reasonable. While arguments mainly appeal to reason, appeals make more use of the passions. They are therefore “symbolic strategies that aim to provoke an emotional response, leading the public to commit to their convictions, loyalties or commitments” (Mateus, 2018, p. 42), exploiting shortcuts to ways of feeling. This distinction turns out to be relevant because, in contexts of political polarization, rhetorical procedures that resort to appeal are even more exploited, resulting in speeches that, as a rule, don't even need an argumentative basis to persuade.

Due to the very nature of the theses with a strong non-scientific appeal defended by Bolsonaro when dealing with COVID-19, his argumentative success depended on possible prior agreements, one of the conditions of rhetorical practices. Agreements function as a kind of shortcut to persuasion, as they engender prior adherence to the premises that lead to the conclusions. Argumentative persuasion is achieved because those who argue are already starting from something that those they are addressing believe. When prior agreement is combined with the so-called confirmation bias, the conditions are in place for accepting any argument, even false premises and false claims (Silva, 2020).

In rhetoric, a fallacy is considered to be an argument that reaches conclusions without the statements being reasonable. Fallacies can even be considered as arguments, but they are logically inconsistent arguments in that they are based on false or mistaken reasoning even though they appear to be consolidated by true foundations. Aristotle already dealt with this in his “Sophistical Refutations” (2005b), listing problems that underlie what we now consider to be fallacious arguments, whose logical errors and deviations can be detected by examining their very structure in the context in which they were constructed.

Fallacies continue to be widely exploited by political agents. What is striking, in Bolsonaro's case, is how they have become a fundamental part of the president's communication strategy in a situation as serious as the COVID-19 pandemic (Klem; Pereira;

Araújo, 2020). If political clashes in democratic regimes involve certain rhetorical resources that have been at the service of the real “outbreak” of disinformation that we have seen throughout the pandemic in Brazil, we need to identify them in order to better deal with them in other contexts. This is what we will do next by referring to some of the stratagems used by Bolsonaro.

## **Understanding Resentments, Fear and Hatred**

One of the characteristics of the Bolsonaro movements was conduct driven by resentment. The president's career mirrored this sentiment to a large extent. Forced to end his military career for violating the Army's disciplinary regulations, he joined politics, but his poor parliamentary performance ended up being marked by numerous pronouncements with marked racist, misogynist and homophobic conduct, as well as defending the military dictatorship and its authoritarian excesses, summary execution and the arming of the population. As a member of parliament, he never presented any relevant projects, nor did he sit on any important committees. He remained on the sidelines of the negotiations that took place in parliament between parties and governments. This led to the construction of an outsider profile, despite the fact that he had been in the Federal Chamber for almost three decades (Nicolau, 2020).

Bolsonaro secured his successive mandates thanks to his aggressive and radical discourse aimed at the most conservative part of the electorate, which took his name to the second round of the presidential race in 2018, when he managed to expand his electorate by appealing, to a large extent, to a passion that results from a lack: resentment. Resentment stems, among other factors, from a fiduciary expectation. In other words, an expectation related to trust (Kehl, 2020). In this case, a subject (citizen, voter) thinks they can count on another (politics and the politician).

When the duty to do is not fulfilled, there is dissatisfaction due to the lack of the desired object and disappointment due to the fiduciary lack. Resentment arises as the acute and repeated awareness of the lack. It's not so much a passion resulting from dissatisfaction, but above all from disappointment which, in the Brazilian case, since the protests in 2013, has been associated with the intricacies of corruption and, in a particular way, with Operation Car Wash. The spectacularization of news coverage has accentuated the criminalization of politics

and contributed to a lack of faith in institutions and the role of the state itself (Avritzer; Kerche; Marona, 2021, p. 229-240).

Although the preferred target was the Workers' Party (PT) and its main protagonist, Lula, the succession of scandals involved leaders of the major Brazilian parties and paved the way for the election of Bolsonaro who, with his main opponents out of the running, was able to successfully take up the moralizing and anti-system discourse. Although it can be pointed to as a fundamental variable in the 2018 presidential race, this lack of trust would not be so decisive if it were not associated with another form of negative expectation, fear (Solano, 2018). This has taken on at least two more visible facets: fear of the loss of purchasing power and social position imposed by the economic crisis, and fear of growing violence, a reflection of urban chaos and the absence of efficient security policies.

Permanent mobilization through alarmist and conspiratorial content; an inverted mirror of the enemy and the return of accusations; and the creation of a direct and exclusive channel of communication between the leadership and its public through the delegitimization of instances of authorized knowledge production in the public sphere (Cesarino, 2019, p. 533).

In this scenario, resentment and fear functioned as passionate elements which, when combined with other conjugations, led to animosity, repulsion and hatred, which guided the election campaign. Unlike resignation, which has no practical consequences, resentment and fear lead to hostility, which corresponds to wanting to harm the other. Ultimately, the other person is blamed for all sorts of faults and a derogatory state of affairs. It is at this point that hatred becomes the driving force behind conflictive sociability (De Paula; Ayala, 2002, p. 133-151).

It was thus a question of an “enemy” capable of taking on many faces and which made up a scheme of intentionality in which “leftists” and “communists” were associated not only with social movement activists, but also with intellectuals, teachers and artists. In order to assume the position of this subject who repairs the fiduciary lack, Bolsonaro was able to invest both in attacking “enemies”, real or imaginary, with such verbal aggression as to incite his followers to violence, as well as in constructing his image as one “sent” by God to fight (Gracino; Goulart; Frias, 2021). In this enunciation as “Messiah”, his main allies have always been the neo-Pentecostal religious leaders who, contradictorily, have not shied away from supporting and defending violence and intolerance.

In Bolsonaro's intriguing journey, his role was that of a subject acting through provocation, confusion and conspiracy theories, strengthening the bond with his most devoted

followers. In order to mask his inability to propose effective solutions to the problems facing the country, he used insults, stupid statements, false information and news that had no basis in reality. There was a recurrent attempt to fuel a “war” against so-called “cultural Marxism”, “depravity”, “disorder” and “banditry” (Viscardi, 2020, p. 1134-1137).

This approach favoured conflicts and the conspiratorial logic of the “enemy” who, depending on the situation, was represented in his interlocution as the most diverse groups, countries, non-governmental organizations, activists from social movements, human and environmental rights, journalists, teachers and other powers of the Republic, especially the judiciary. It is also important to point out that this journey was strategically guided by the way in which he knew how to occupy his place as the subject of a crisis. However, it is possible to suspect that this might not have been so effective if it hadn't been for the corporate spirit consolidated by the more radicalized bases of adherence, as we will see in the next section of this article.

## **Dividing Arguments of Authority, Apocalyptic Chaos, Conspirances and Messianisms**

In his public conversations, Bolsonaro often quoted the passage from the Gospel of John (8:32): “Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free”. He often used this biblical passage to refer to specific facts with the intention of exposing the supposed conspiratorial plans advocated by his opponents. Nor did he hesitate to make repeated public appeals to the effect that his election was presumably a fraud and that, without the conspiratorial attempts to overthrow him, he would have won the election in the first round. However, he has never provided any proof of his accusations.

Such a rhetorical strategy is based on “hermetic semiosis”, as suggested by Umberto Eco (1993). This is one of the main characteristics of populist and conspiratorial narratives. As the Italian author points out, a hermetic discourse “identifies the truth with what is not said, or what is said in an obscure way and must be understood between the lines” (Eco, 1993, p. 40). This is the case with Bolsonaro's messianic discourse. There is, however, another aspect of his narrative that should be noted and which is also manifested by the frequent use of the biblical text from the Gospel of John, chapter 8, verse 32. An amalgam capable of combining hermeticism and ambiguity that takes on mystical overtones. Like a prophet,

Bolsonaro speaks as if he were in direct contact with God, from whom he seems to have obtained a “Supreme Truth” (Gracino; Goulart; Frias, 2021, p. 547-570).

His discourse is based on and operates in a “dimension” whereby, in order for a text to be accepted as “true”, it must first be perceived as a kind of “secret” (Greimas, 2014, p. 108). This means that Bolsonaro was able to appropriate a communication style from a hermetic-hermeneutic perspective. A reality similar to what happens in Christian preaching and representation. The addresser, speaking in the first person, presents himself as an omniscient “I”. A kind of “guarantor” or “endorser” of some greater truth (Greimas, 2014, p. 123). While characteristic of populist and conspiratorial narratives, hermeticism and empathy are also elements of mystical discourse. Thus, language, as well as the mystical experience, can be read in many ways.

Bolsonaro's conspiratorial mysticism presupposes a “truth” that can refer very broadly to anything. From time to time, the enemy can be Lula, the Supreme Court, China, the so-called anti-Christian globalist elites (Carvalho, 2009), or all of these aspects together. What is “true” and what is “false” is deliberated according to the needs of the moment. However, without neglecting some divine imperative that is capable of consolidating it.

What is true today could be false tomorrow. It is no coincidence, from this perspective, that another central aspect of Bolsonaro's discourse is the systematic use of self-contradiction, just as it doesn't seem random that he often refers to “truth” using the future tense: “then you will know the Truth, and the Truth will set you free”. Similarly to what happens in neo-Pentecostal evangelical preaching, the experience of “Truth” promoted by Bolsonaro is an eternal promise of freedom and prosperity that tends never to be effectively realized, as it needs to keep alive the involvement in the battle against the occult powers that rule the world (Lacerda, 2019).

It is possible to say, by extension, that Bolsonaro's mystical discourse places the truth in an unfeasible or utopian future. This means that his claim has to do with something that is revealed in an obscure way, structuring the image of an interlocutor capable of reading between the lines. Someone who is part of a small group, but who would have been reached by a full illustration. A person chosen to carry out an unprecedented mission (Laclau, 2013). This is therefore one of the most effective manipulation strategies of hermetic semiosis: a secret that should be both veiled and unveiled.

Given this scenario, in Brazil, as in countless other countries around the world, all social networks have been used in recent years to build and maintain the message and persona of politicians, disseminate ideas of all kinds (including conspiracy

theories and false and manipulated information) and attract voters (Viscardi, 2020, p. 1137).

In Bolsonaro's speeches, truth contemplates this semiotic tension towards an unrealizable future, just as the future engenders semiotic tension towards an inaccessible truth. The ultimate truth can never be reached: it can only be pursued and imagined. Taking this search as a reference, it should be noted that in this diffuse tangle of "truths", there is an interlocution with many themes, figures, objects, subjects and values, sometimes contradictory, susceptible to being rearranged according to the vicissitudes of the moment. Basically, the power of those who claim to know and want to reveal a "secret" is to possess an empty secret (Eatwell; Goodwin, 2020).

The apocalypse based on conspiratorial perceptions is an aspect of Bolsonaro's messianic discourse linked to a scenario of destruction and persecution of Christian people around the world. This reality is imagined as part of a conspiratorial plan by "communist" groups on a global scale. A world on the brink of chaos and destruction. Bolsonaro, whenever he could, insisted that Brazil was close to a moral, social and economic catastrophe. The country could succumb to a supposed attack by the "system" and the "hidden powers" that, in the meantime, have been subjecting our autonomy for many decades (Rocha, 2021, p. 107-193).

It is worth noting that during the pandemic crisis, eschatological narratives and mentions of the rise of globalist elites were consolidated and became abundant on social media. Likewise, there were countless messages and references claiming that the pandemic was part of a plan hatched by the "Chinese empire" with the explicit support of the political forces opposing Bolsonaro. This reality would converge so that we would experience planned "chaos", "violence" and "economic crisis". This strategy with the proliferation of a virus, supposedly created by China to exterminate part of the world's population, would serve the purpose of acquiring Brazilian land, companies and industries. By extension, people would end up without food and at the mercy of "bandits" and violence without the state institutions having the means to restore order (Silva, 2020, p. 1478-1488).

One of the rhetorical resources used by Bolsonaro was the argument from authority. Through it, he sought to convince the population not so much because of what he was saying, but much more because of his personal integrity backed by the figure of the nation's representative. It is an artifice in which "one introduces oneself as proof in the examination of the question, mentioning one's knowledge or any other qualities" (Fiorin, 2015, p. 176).

From Bolsonaro's perspective, the authority established in the figure of the president himself is also underlined through certain “experts” who are ideologically in line with the references that corroborate his positions. The discourse posits a benefit in terms of an appeal, inciting emotions and collective feelings (Fiorin, 2015, p. 224). It is not uncommon for people to exacerbate a very incisive relationship in these moments. Shouting, crying, swearing. There is a harmony between the individual who exalts certain actions and the potential recipients. The speaker's opinion gains credibility.

### **Looking at Generalizations, Appels to Ignorance and Dichotomies**

One of the conjunctural characteristics of Brazilian neoliberal rationality aligned with the ideals advocated by Bolsonaro has to do with the transformation of people based on the dictates of the economy, which transcends into the different facets of human life. This is consistent with the articulations in the world of work, in political life and in relationships between people. According to American political philosopher Wendy Brown, when this argument is transmuted into the different spheres of life by means of economic elements, the result inevitably tends to be the dismantling of democratic principles.

It is not equal treatment that is postulated, but the very foundations of the social pact (Brown, 2019, p. 32-50). The premises surrounding the ideals of equality are replaced by a binary sense that assumes the existence of victors and losers. Freedom becomes dissociated from the concept of controlling the people. A self-mastery submissive to the market. The notion of freedom and popular participation is replaced by an “instrumental market rationality” (Brown, 2019, p. 41), which commands and restricts individuals' choices and ambitions. Actions that require some political protagonism will have to be backed up by economic arguments, obviously affecting the justice system, the educational, cultural, religious and legal spheres and everyday sociability.

These new forces combine familiar elements of neoliberalism (favouring capital, repression of labour, demonization of the social and political state, attack on equality and exaltation of freedom) with their apparent opposites (nationalism, imposition of traditional morality, populist anti-elitism and demands for state solutions to economic and social problems (Brown, 2019, p. 10).

According to Wendy Brown, the crisis of democracy is also closely linked to the rise of populist leaders around the world. There is therefore a symbiosis of principles, values and interests present in what the author calls the “forces of the extreme right” (Brown, 2019, p. 9).

This populist nationalism was assimilated in a very incisive way in the Brazilian case, at the same time as it also opened up space to reproduce the usual meanings of neoliberalism, which continue to expand as a social force that, at first glance, may even seem contrasting in their own complexion.

Today, we could speak of a post-democratic state, a state which, from an economic point of view, takes up the proposals of neoliberalism with force, while, from a political point of view, it presents itself as a mere instrument for maintaining order, controlling unwanted populations and expanding the conditions for the accumulation of capital and the generation of profits (Casara, 2017, p. 17).

It is a gradual, constant and mass process. The signs, the violations, the offenses and the abuses are quite evident. Even so, the condescending silence of state institutions tends to prevail. There is no attribution of blame, but rather a permissiveness in the face of absurdities, the denial of politics, especially for the left, revanchist thinking and intolerance. Precepts are justified and certain understandings of what happened in the past are invalidated (Silva; Schurster, 2022, p. 261-169). It is no coincidence that an effort is made to praise an ideal and imaginary past in order to justify one's own perception of the present.

According to researcher Lilia Schwarcz, authoritarian leaders tend to “create their own history - to go back to the past in search of a mythical, laudatory narrative without concern for comparing facts and data” (2019, p. 225). This means praising, above all, the idea of a past in which a nation's prosperity was the overriding rule. For the author, religious, cultural and also ethnic ultranationalism, combined with the need for a leader with charismatic and messianic characteristics, is capable of naturalizing the fact that some groups acquire greater notoriety to the detriment of minorities (real or imagined) who come to be seen as foreigners in their own country.

Thus, subordinated to moralism with a messianic complexion, reality is questioned, resulting in fanciful approaches that promote random visions and an aversion to scientific thought. Often, those who dare to challenge anything that is not in line with the paradigms of the groups “chosen” for the redemptive mission are reprimanded. The result is the dehumanization of segments of the population and the impossibility of promoting empathetic experiences.

They rewrite the population's general understanding of reality by distorting the language of idealization through propaganda and promoting anti-intellectualism, attacking universities and educational systems that could challenge their ideas. After a while, with these techniques, politics [...] ends up creating a state of unreality, in which conspiracy theories and fake news take the place of reasoned debate (Stanley, 2008, p. 10).

Bolsonaro's disguised statements were a strategy that deliberately diverted the focus from the many dilemmas experienced by the Brazilian population in the face of the pandemic. The constant appeals to ignorance, as a rule, reverberated in everyday social relations through an expression that amplified doubt. The president of the republic, by simultaneously defending the use of alternative medicines such as chloroquine, also ended up sharing certain values that were underlined by his more radicalized supporters. There was a close connection with the theme of freedom as a premise that mirrored a series of speeches that disavowed policies in favour of immunization through vaccines.

Bolsonaro knew how to associate his convictions with the advocacy of certain “experts” who, in his view, belonged to the same ideological spectrum as his government. Appeals to ignorance occurred, for example, when he advocated strengthening immunity as a means of preventing contamination. Therefore, by guaranteeing greater immunity, the fragility of the body would supposedly be protected. After all, if a person knew how to take care of their own immunity, they would invariably not be contaminated by COVID-19. By extension, there would be no need to be in isolation. The fear of greater coexistence would be a ruse used by individuals with shady interests.

The argument disseminated exhaustively by the Brazilian president highlighted a controversial dichotomy: either the individual would die because of the contamination of the pathogen or, invariably, they would succumb to hunger. This ludicrous argument obviously presented people with an unprecedented dilemma. A threatening future surrounded by a fog of multiple apprehensions. A contingency represented by a bleak future. By exacerbating a catastrophic reality, an exhaustive tension was undeniably maintained through words and strategic appeals (Lima de Arruda, 2021, p. 81-93).

According to the definition advocated by the Austro-Hungarian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich in his seminal work - *Psychology of the Masses* - there would be a need for protection on the part of an authoritarian, stern but kind father figure. Acceptance by the masses would make the authoritarian individual capable of achieving public support. A leader would take on these characteristics, embodying the desires of a community. The population would submit to the leader's appeals despite anything that might disqualify him. Reich suggests an analogy with families who, in submission, can accept and sometimes even hide certain deviations of the father. The basis of the masses would therefore lie, on the one hand, in the family and, on the other, in the character of these nuclei which, especially in the poorer strata, would have a more incisive repercussion on their attachment to a nation or homeland.

“[...] the result of this is conservatism, fear of freedom, in short, a reactionary mentality” (Reich, 2001, p. 29).

It's no accident or causality that in the field of reactionary values, we see characteristics such as “moralism” about customs (which is inseparably linked to prejudice, homophobia, etc.), the defense of the “family”, as well as so-called “irrationalism”, “violence”, the myth of xenophobia and racism as constituents of the nation, and the clamor for “order” aligned with the abstract defense of the “nation”. The recent Dantesque scene of “demonstrators” wrapped in the Brazilian flag, on their knees and hands on their heads, calling for military intervention is the image that condenses all these elements (Iasi, 2018, p. 27).

Although people are distinct in their individuality, when they congregate around the same cause and share certain aspirations, there can be a perception that there is a battle to be fought because of some imminent danger. That's why attacks on democratic institutions, such as the Supreme Court, and inflammatory speeches full of calls for military intervention, lead to a feeling that certain people have been chosen for the mission of safeguarding the good of an entire nation.

This is an individual who sacrifices their personal interests in favor of something greater. They are influential and lack critical perception of what they stand for. Through his certainties, he doesn't hesitate to trumpet what he considers dangerous, often referring to the suppression of freedom. A reality that gives rise to a rearrangement of convictions through fictitious and even bellicose tensions.

If you can be a feminist, I can be a sexist; if you can defend the cause of black people, I will defend whiteness; if there can be an LGBT march, why not one dedicated to straight pride. What is ignored in this equivalence procedure is precisely that the feminist or anti-racist cause aims to include people who are de facto or de jure excluded from democracy, while the reverse arguments defend an exclusive democracy. In other words, a democracy defined by its past confronts a democracy defined by its future subject (Dunker, 2019, p. 126).

The imaginary that underlies the dynamics of power is not only translated into a “conservative” perspective, but, as a rule, has to do with the contours of reactionarism and irrationality, offensives contrary to certain civilizing ideals and revolutionary achievements engendered by the Enlightenment, modernity, political liberalism, constitutionalism, democracy and the welfare state, fundamental and human rights, allied to the principles of equality, freedom and fraternity (Silva, 2000, p. 11-21).

Jair Bolsonaro and his most loyal followers have been transformed into the last moral reserve of “Christian” truths and “Western” principles and values. In this sense, they are also the only ones who have the capacity to confront the reality that is being imposed on the

horizon of contemporary sociability (Mudde, 2020). The rhetorical logic is formulated through simplifications devoid of discernment guided by reasonableness. It is a matter of underlining the belief that Bolsonaro was chosen to fight a powerful system that, on a daily basis, is notorious for shaping an unprecedented conspiracy against his expiatory mission.

## **Final Considerations**

If we consider rhetoric as a strategy that includes a theoretical character and an instrumental sense, it is plausible to see that it is something that can be assimilated by anyone who wants to convince others of their ideological values. When everyday political practices are based on fierce polarization, rhetorical knowledge needs to be considered as an element capable of explaining the means of confronting the recurring processes in Brazilian society.

What can be seen by broadening the horizon of the issues covered here is that there are multiple articulations of a politically conservative discourse about citizenship with great appeal for portraying certain distinctions between those who are seen as included and others who are seen as excluded. There is also, by extension, a possibility of delimiting an 'us' that is enhanced through the persecution of others seen as 'impure', 'immoral', 'unworthy'. It is no coincidence that the notion of 'citizenship' can be used to violate rights, intolerance and racism.

The pandemic crisis has led to major transformations in social interactions, but it has also increased disinformation and the spread of conspiracy theories like no other time in our recent history. This phenomenon has taken on emblematic contours and proportions, thanks, of course, to the role of the President of the Republic himself as an agent of disinformation. It is very challenging to realize that we live in a time when hatred is being made explicit, especially on social networks.

Finally, it should be noted that issues related to the family, customs and religion, as well as patriotic feelings, reinforce an important appeal for the processes of domination in a governance based on the broad spectrum of nationalism, the defense of the homeland and a supposed sexual morality. Throughout its history, Brazilian society has always been surrounded by appeals to morality and threats against vulnerable groups. For this reason, actions and speeches that are not in line with the foundations of a democratic state based on the rule of law obviously do not give rise to or support a free, fraternal and plural society.

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