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Authoritarian Populism as a Response to Crisis: The Case of Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates that the authoritarian populist strategy is most appealing when leaders create a sense of crisis and present themselves as having the only solution. The article underlines three performative methods of how Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil offered simple answers for a crisis and portrayed other political actors as the responsible ones to be removed. Firstly, nativism presents a conservative view on how politics should be structured by perceiving all “non-natives” as threatening. Secondly, messianism, the fetishism of Bolsonaro as a “messiah” who leads the way in the battle between “good” and “evil,” serves to reinforce the support of the Evangelist base against “PT members.” Finally, conspiracism provides an easy way to eradicate ambiguities and helps to fuel an antagonism against the “enemy.”

Keywords: Bolsonaro, performance of crisis, nativism, messianism, conspiracism.

Krize Yanıt olarak Otoriter Popülizm: Brezilya Örneđi

ÖZET

Bu makale, liderlerin bir kriz hissi yaratmayı başardıkları ve kendilerini krizi çözebilecek tek kiři olarak ortaya koyabildikleri durumlarda otoriter popülist stratejilerin daha etkin olduğunu göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Makale, Brezilya’da Jair Bolsonaro’nun krizleri çözmek için basit çözümler sunmasını ve diđer politik aktörleri ortadan kaldırılması gereken suçlular olarak göstermesini sađlayan üç temel stratejiye işaret etmektedir. Öncelikle, yerelcilik, “yerel olmayan” herkesi ve her şeyi tehdit olarak algılayarak siyasetin nasıl yapılandırılması gerektiđine dair muhafazakâr bir görüş sunmaktadır. İkinci olarak, Bolsonaro’nun “iyi” ve “kötü” arasındaki savařta yol gösterici bir “Mesih” olarak öne çıkmasıyla gelişen, lider-fetiřizmine dayanan Mesih inancı, İşçi Partisi destekçilerine karşı Evanjelist tabanın desteđini güçlendirmeye yaramaktadır. Son olarak, komploculuk, belirsizlikleri ortadan kaldırmak için kolay bir yol göstermekte ve antagonizmi körüklemeye yardımcı olmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bolsonaro, kriz performansı, yerelcilik, Mesih inancı, komploculuk.

Introduction

During the past decade, authoritarian populism has gained momentum in world politics with the rise of rightist/far-rightist leaders, including Viktor Mihály Orbán (2010) in Hungary, Narendra Modi (2014) in India, Rodrigo Duterte (2016) in the Philippines, Donald Trump (2016) in the United States, Andrej Babiš (2017) in the Czech Republic, and Jair Bolsonaro (2018) in Brazil. Furthermore, the outcome of the Brexit referendum in 2016 demonstrated that even if authoritarian populist trends do not dominate national politics, they can still shape the policy agenda by fueling anti-E.U. and anti-immigrant attitudes.¹ It is essential to comprehend how authoritarian values combine with right-wing populist rhetoric in the current conjuncture, marked by the uncertainties arising from the continuing effects of the 2007-2008 global economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.² Examining the roots of authoritarian populism embedded in the political economy of modern capitalism would exceed the limits of the article. However, focusing on how authoritarian leaders create a sense of crisis and respond to that crisis will contribute to understanding authoritarian populist movements. This article argues that accelerating anxiety and manipulating ethnic, religious, and cultural differences can be the primary authoritarian populist mechanism to respond to crisis.

This article uses the term “authoritarian populism” as a distinctive combination of authoritarianism and populism, following the theoretical framework developed by Stuart Hall in his analysis on Thatcherism and applied to the Brazilian case by Neto and Cipriani,³ De Oliveira and Maia,⁴ and Morelock and Narita.⁵ The first section of the article discusses the advantages and limitations of using the term in the Brazilian context to put this position forward. Accordingly, the following sections examine how authoritarian populism emerged as a response to crisis in Brazil. The electoral victory of Jair Bolsonaro, a polarizing figure who has consistently been promoting authoritarian values, has drawn on bitter conflicts and antagonisms. The construction of existential threats and the fear of “dangerous others” are Bolsonaro’s main answer to crisis. The article addresses three mechanisms through which Bolsonaro aims to construct a “popular” consent to an authoritarian regime in Brazil. These mechanisms are closely associated with the six-step model developed by Benjamin Moffitt to explain how populist actors “perform” crisis and try to unite “the people” against a dangerous other.⁶ On this basis, it firstly examines nativism as a conservative view on how politics should be structured by perceiving all “non-native” peoples and ideas as threatening. Secondly, messianism, the fetishism of Bolsonaro as a “messiah” who leads the way in the battle between “good” and “evil,” will be discussed as an in-

1 Pippa Norris and Roland Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 12.

2 One could argue that authoritarian populism can also be combined with left-wing social policy. Still, I assert that the phenomenon was born to address specific conditions in which far-right leaders appealed to the “people” with populist attitudes to promote authoritarian measures. A leftist leader can also be both authoritarian and populist, but the term “authoritarian populism,” which Stuart Hall coined, can be applied as a distinctive version of far-right populism.

3 Moysés Pinto Neto and Marcelli Cipriani, “Populismo Autoritário e Bolsonarismo Popular: Caminhos Comparados do Punitivismo a Partir de Stuart Hall”, *Revista de Criminologias Contemporâneas*, Vol. 1, No 1, 2021, p. 41-56.

4 Bruna Silveira de Oliveira and Rousiley Celi Moreira Maia, “REDES BOLSONARISTAS: O Ataque ao Politicamente Correto e Conexões com o Populismo Autoritário”, *Confluências | Revista Interdisciplinar de Sociologia e Direito*, Vol. 22, No 3, 2020, p. 83-114.

5 Jeremiah Morelock and Felipe Ziotti Narita, “A Dialectical Constellation of Authoritarian Populism in the United States and Brazil”, Jeremiah Morelock (ed.), *How to Critique Authoritarian Populism*, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2021, p. 85-107.

6 Benjamin Moffitt, “How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism”, *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 50, No 2, 2015, p. 189-217.

strument that serves to reinforce the support of the Evangelist social base against the Workers' Party (PT) members (*petistas*). Finally, the article demonstrates how conspiracism provides an easy way to eradicate ambiguities and helps to fuel an antagonism against "enemies." It concludes by assessing the potential of alternative political realities constructed by authoritarian populists to appeal to people in times of crisis.

Construction of Popular Consent and Formulating Coercive Responses to Crisis

The term "authoritarian populism" emerged to conceptualize the new moment in the conjuncture of the capitalist restructuring in the 1970s. After reading Nicos Poulantzas's *State, Power, Socialism*, Stuart Hall developed the concept to periodize the "relationship between the state and the political crisis."⁷ He found many similarities between his considerations formulated in *Policing the Crisis* and Poulantzas's discussions of "authoritarian statism" as a distinctive form of the capitalist state. Yet Poulantzas focused on the totalitarianism inherent in every capitalist state and the construction of hegemony in the ruling classes. Hall shifted the characterization of the conjuncture from "authoritarian statism" to "authoritarian populism" to comprehend how popular consent is constructed, a dimension that he thinks Poulantzas neglected.⁸ According to Hall, the British state's crisis in the 1970s was an "exceptional moment" in which "representative" and "interventionist" aspects of the state were combined in a particular form.⁹ Therefore, authoritarian populism emerges as a response to the crisis, aiming to "construct a popular consent to an authoritarian regime."¹⁰ Based on this framework, the authoritarian position is accompanied by a "powerful groundswell of popular legitimacy" and constructs an "authoritarian consensus."¹¹ Hall argues that this response to the crisis can be seen as a distinctive form of "passive revolution," which aims to "shift the previously existing disposition of social forces," as Gramsci described.¹² Conceptualizing authoritarian populism as a response to a specific crisis defined as "an actual field of struggle, on which the forces of right have been actively intervening" enables us to question the "exceptional moment" in which we live.

Hall explicitly clarifies how the public's anxieties in times of crisis and the perceived threats to the state coincide.¹³ Through the "discovery of demons," "the identification of folk devils," and "the mounting of moral campaigns," authoritarian populists create several "moral-panics."¹⁴ Using Stanley Cohen's criminological concept, Hall demonstrates how Margaret Thatcher established hegemony in the United Kingdom through a climate of paranoia, which combines some threats to the well-being of society with social concerns. The next stage is where social anxiety can refer to a specific enemy and a hidden power "behind everything" as well. Hall examines how the crisis

7 Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, London and New York, Verso, 1988, p. 152.

8 Ibid.

9 Stuart Hall, "Popular Democratic vs. Authoritarian Populism: Two Ways of Taking Democracy Seriously", Alan Hunt (ed.), *Marxism and Democracy*, London and New Jersey, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980, p. 164.

10 Ibid, p. 168-169.

11 Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, London and Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 1978, p. 321.

12 Hall, "Popular Democratic vs. Authoritarian Populism", p. 182.

13 Hall et al, *Policing the Crisis*, p. 321.

14 Ibid, p. 322.

in this stage looks like a more concrete set of fears and ironically appears in its most abstract form as a “general conspiracy.”¹⁵ In today’s world, where the ability of people to tolerate uncertainties is decreasing, conspiracist assault on common sense has emerged as an inseparable component of authoritarian populism.

Neto and Cipriani assert that the significance of Hall’s analysis is that it depends on a “bottom-up thinking,” which enables an understanding of authoritarian populism not only as an “organized conspiracies coming from above,” but also as “a specific alliance with the poor population” through conservative values such as family, nation, duty, and order.¹⁶ According to Hall, the phenomenon is not characterized by the mere imposition of an “external force”; instead, it has roots in people’s thoughts and experiences. So, the authors find Hall’s consideration helpful to explain how Bolsonaro’s campaign served to translate desires, anxieties, and morals, whose bases were already established in the urban peripheries.¹⁷ Neto and Cipriani focus on urban peripheries and consider Bolsonarism a new national-popular project that can redefine common sense and naturalize and operate unconsciously among ordinary people in their daily lives.¹⁸ As interests are being redefined, politically and ideologically, conflict among different income groups occurs in morals throughout the representation process. In this way, Bolsonarism can articulate different social and economic interests within the same political project depending on a neoliberal agenda.

The end of PT rule under Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil was a significant shift from new-developmentalism to ultra-neoliberalism. The commodity price shock in 2014-2016 demonstrated the fragility of the PT’s new developmentalist model, which combined macro-economic stability with social justice. Under less favorable external conditions, balancing the diverse interests of different social classes was more challenging in an unequal society.¹⁹ The severe economic crisis occurred alongside the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, who was accused of violating Brazil’s fiscal responsibility law, and the subsequent political polarization paved the way for the rise of Bolsonaro, who blames the PT governments’ developmentalist policies for the recession and corruption. Neoliberalism emerged in its most radical form in Brazil under the Bolsonaro government, dismantling social policies, making labor legislation more flexible, and advancing privatizations of state-owned enterprises.²⁰ Depending on Hall’s writings on authoritarian populism and Poulantzas’s arguments of authoritarian statism, Ian Bruff emphasizes that neoliberalism has always contained authoritarian tendencies but prominently tilted towards coercion with more punitive penal and criminal policies since the global economic crisis in 2008.²¹ Applying the term “authoritarian populism” in the Brazilian context will then update Hall’s argument to the era of the post-2008 rise of “authoritarian neoliberalism,” an interrelated dynamic.

15 Ibid, p. 323.

16 Neto and Cipriani, “Populismo Autoritário e Bolsonarismo Popular”, p. 41.

17 Ibid, p. 46.

18 Ibid, p. 44.

19 Judit Ricz, “The Rise and Fall (?) of a New Developmental State in Brazil”, *Society and Economy*, Vol. 39, No 1, 2017, p. 105.

20 Mayra Goulart Da Silva and Theófilo Codeço Machado Rodrigues, “O Populismo de Direita No Brasil: Neoliberalismo e Autoritarismo No Governo Bolsonaro”, *Mediações-Revista de Ciências Sociais*, Vol. 26, No 1, 2021, p. 101-102.

21 Ian Bruff, “The Rise of Authoritarian Neoliberalism”, *Rethinking Marxism*, Vol. 26, No 1, p. 116.

Neto and Cipriani point out the importance of punitivism,²² since the fear of being the victim of a crime and the demand for “greater punishment and state repression” were essential elements of support for Bolsonaro’s campaign.²³ The fear of violence in a “world of crime” has been seen as a vital factor in destabilizing residents’ ontological security, breaking with the predictability of their routines, and raising collective anxiety. As stated in the work of Neto and Cipriani, these conditions make room for tensions in the social order that can be exploited by operations of authoritarian populism, especially in the peripheries. Besides, the expansion of the “world of crime” within an incrimination process has historically criminalized the peripheral population in Brazil, who are the primary victims of crime.²⁴ Police militarization legitimizes repressive violence against marginalized social groups, including Afro-Brazilians. Bolsonaro has been constructing a militarist regime in which guns are more readily available to Brazilians who want to feel safe in a “world of crime.” It is ironic that Bolsonaro, a former military officer whose salutation is a two-fingered gun sign, spreading more anger and fear, can appeal not only to the fanatics but also to ordinary people who look for peace and calm. This ability to create a sense of crisis through the fear of crime makes neoliberal regime shifts and neoliberal restructuring processes more authoritarian in countries where military regimes restrict democracy for a period and the militarization process affects all aspects of public and private life.

Furthermore, Hall’s discussions of political correctness²⁵ contributed to a better understanding of the centrality of language and discourse to power operations. Hall argues that the ascendancy of authoritarian populist leaders was mainly built on their mastery of the ideological terrain: “their willingness to address ideological questions like morality, sexuality, parenting, and education.”²⁶ According to Hall, the rise of political correctness in the 1990s can be considered a response to the rise of authoritarian populism, to challenge their assumptions built into our everyday use of language.²⁷ Correspondingly, De Oliveira and Maia demonstrate that “anti-political correctness” is a significant component of contemporary authoritarian populism, which can be seen explicitly in the Brazilian case.²⁸ On this basis, anti-elitism, the urge for a homogenous society, and the projection of an ideal future are the three main dimensions of the attack on political correctness intertwined with tactics emerging in “post-truth” politics. Authoritarian populism seeks the people’s homogeneity and constructs antagonism to tolerance and inclusion.²⁹

Another critical position connected to Hall’s study is Morelock and Narita’s framework, which describes authoritarian populism as a narrative and socio-psychological phenomenon. The central assumption underlying the authors’ thinking is that authoritarian populist political mobilization is generated from experienced deprivations and threats, occurring in both discursive and structural dimensions of social life.³⁰ Through adapting a dialectic methodology, Morelock and Narita identify

22 Punitivism here is understood as a populist strategy of using histrionic discourses in the media and adapting coercive control in criminal law, with restriction of rights, extensions of penalties, and promotion of mass incarceration.

23 Neto and Cipriani, “Populismo Autoritário e Bolsonarismo Popular”, p. 50.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

25 Stuart Hall, “Some ‘Politically Incorrect’ Pathways through PC”, Sarah Dunant (ed.), *The War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate*, London, Virago, 1994, p. 164-183.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 169-180.

28 Oliveira and Maia, “REDES BOLSONARISTAS”, p. 83-114.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

30 Morelock and Narita, “A Dialectical Constellation of Authoritarian Populism”, p. 87-88.

the social and narrative dynamics which emerge as the domains of authoritarianism and populism run together in the United States and Brazil. These emergent elements are: (i) decisionism, the belief that the leader, “the spokesperson for the authentic people’s will,” must be “free” of bureaucracy to govern by his own decisions; (ii) the construction of the charismatic leader; and (iii) mythological uses of the past such as “make America/Brazil great again.”³¹ Decisionism serves as a justification for the dictatorial undermining of the separation of forces; the charisma calls for obedience to the leader because of his “superhuman gifts”; and finally, mythological uses of the past give an impulse toward “retrotopia”—defined by Zygmunt Bauman as a utopic vision focused on an abandoned past—in the absence of any viable future utopian visions.³²

On the other hand, Jessop et al. criticized Hall’s approach for generating an excessive focus on ideological and discursive dimensions of authoritarian populism at the expense of the political economy of Thatcherism.³³ Thus, the differences between North and South limit the understanding of the impact of authoritarian populism. Hall, as a response, indicated that his intention was never to produce a “general explanation” of Thatcherism, and his work was not an effort to universalize the appeal of Thatcherism as a “monolithic monstrosity.”³⁴ On the contrary, Hall considered authoritarian populism a multifaceted historical phenomenon that could not be explained along one dimension. Therefore, it cannot be considered a “global phenomenon” that affects all aspects of authoritarian politics. Instead, applying Hall’s argument today will contribute to comprehending the shifts in the ideological conjuncture in the post-2008 economic crisis. Accordingly, nativism, messianism, and conspiracism will be discussed in the following sections, supporting the article’s central argument of Bolsonarism as authoritarian populism.

Nativism as a Method for Mobilization of Socioeconomic Anxieties

There is a growing consensus that authoritarian populism is nativist today.³⁵ Nativism, historically and ideologically, is understood as a particular configuration of nationalism, shaped under conditions of mass migration. It can be argued that immigration is not a key concern in Brazilian populism, as the country is far from attracting immigrants like the United States or Western Europe, and mass migration plays a minor role in public debate.³⁶ The role of nativism in Brazilian politics will be limited compared to U.S. and European politics. However, three points should be emphasized to take Bolsonarism as a nativist authoritarian populism. Firstly, the construction of the “native” is not only based on “non-native persons” but also on “non-native ideas.” Accordingly, nativist othering can also be applied to the elite, which are also considered an “external threat” to the “people.”³⁷ As Mudde expresses, nativist populists accuse the elite of “destroying the welfare state to incorporate the immigrants, their alleged new electorate” and demand “a welfare state for their ‘own people’ first.”³⁸ Anti-elitism and apprecia-

31 Ibid, p. 99-102.

32 Ibid, p. 100-101.

33 Bop Jessop et al., “Authoritarian Populism, Two Nations, and Thatcherism”, *New Left Review*, Vol. 147, No 1, 1984, p. 38.

34 Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, p. 150.

35 Cas Mudde, “The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy”, *West European Politics*, Vol. 33, No 6, 2010, p. 1173.

36 Morelock and Narita, “A Dialectical Constellation of Authoritarian Populism”, p. 95.

37 Eirikur Bergmann, *Neo-Nationalism: The Rise of Nativist Populism*, Cham, Springer Nature, 2020, p. 39.

38 Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 35.

tion of colloquial language in the discourse of Bolsonaro reveal the appreciation of the “outsider” and the perception that “people” are always a priority in governance.³⁹ According to the nativist authoritarian populists, the state should be structured to protect the “nation,” determined by the native culture/ideology/identity.

Such rhetoric is generally reinforced by crisis, as structural transformations are more convenient for mobilizing socioeconomic anxieties. The impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff by Congress in 2016, the political corruption scandals, and the recession paved the way for a prolonged period of uncertainty and provoked widespread anxieties. Bolsonaro vilified *petistas* as “the corrupt elites” and framed them as the enemy responsible for the economic downturn and corruption. He blamed the PT for executing a plan to spread its “communist” ideology and undermine the traditional family and its values.⁴⁰ Such discourse can be seen in the following examples:

“It’s us and PT: It’s the Brazil green and yellow, and them, representing Cuban and Venezuelan government, with their red flag. Let’s change Brazil!”

“The other side is the return of the past, is the corruption, the lies, the contempt of family,”

“*Petralhada*,⁴¹ you won’t have any more shots in our homeland because I will cut off all of your luxuries.”⁴²

Bolsonaro’s polarizing rhetoric aims to justify non-democratic means to defeat his enemy, as the political differences are framed as “irreconcilable cleavages.”⁴³ It is a way of adopting an “anything goes” approach towards the “enemy” and legitimizing an authoritarian rule to fight “moral collapse.”

Secondly, although immigration never dramatically affected Brazil, newcomers entered the country over a long period; nativist sentiments, support for anti-immigrant movements, and restrictions on immigration have proved enduring elements during the waves of immigration since the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ Nativism has a strong tradition in Brazil since it has its roots in the Jacobin movement of the 1890s, whose discourse revolved under the slogan of “Brazil for the Brazilians.”⁴⁵ With the rise of fascism in the early 1930s, the Vargas government adopted a restrictive immigration policy based on “selection criteria” and “national security.”⁴⁶ The tendency to attribute problems to specific ethnic groups and immigrants was always one of the elements of populist rhetoric in Brazil. Authoritarian turns in Brazilian politics have usually favored restrictions on immigration, and authoritarian leaders constantly labeled immigrants as threats to national security, national economy, and national culture.⁴⁷

39 Oliveira and Maia, “REDES BOLSONARISTAS”, p. 84.

40 Eduardo Ryo Tamaki and Mario Fuks, “Populism in Brazil’s 2018 General Elections: An Analysis of Bolsonaro’s Campaign Speeches”, *Lua Nova: Revista de Cultura e Política*, No 109, 2020, p. 114-115.

41 *Metralha + petista = Petralhada*. (*Meltralha* is the “Beagle Boys”, cartoon characters of a family clan of organized criminals).

42 Tamaki and Fuks, “Populism in Brazil’s 2018 General Elections”, p. 114-116.

43 Morelock and Narita, “A Dialectical Constellation of Authoritarian Populism”, p. 99.

44 Sandra McGee Deutsch, *Las Derechas: The Extreme Right in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, 1890-1939*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 41-43; Ron L. Seckinger, “The Politics of Nativism: Ethnic Prejudice and Political Power in Mato Grosso, 1831-1834”, *The Americas*, Vol. 31, No 4, 1975, p. 393-394.

45 Deutsch, *Las Derechas*, p. 43.

46 Maria Luiza Tucci Carneiro, “Imigrantes Indesejáveis. A Ideologia do Etiquetamento durante a Era Vargas”, *Revista USP*, No 119, 2018, p. 117-118.

47 Felipe A. Filomeno and Thomas J. Vicino, “The Evolution of Authoritarianism and Restrictionism in Brazilian Immigration Policy: Jair Bolsonaro in Historical Perspective”, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 2020.

Lastly, migration has become an essential issue in Brazil over the last several years, with the new asylum claims from Venezuelans, Colombians, Haitians, and Syrians. According to a recent World Bank report, Brazil's refugee and migrant population increased from about 0.7 million in 2016 to 1.4 million in July 2020. Venezuelans became the largest refugee and migrant population (261,000 as of October 2020).⁴⁸ The influx and complex situation of refugees along the Venezuela-Brazil border led to tensions, escalating xenophobia. Bolsonaro adopted nativist rhetoric during his campaign and pulled the country out of a United Nations (UN) Migration Pact in his second week in the office, tweeting: "No to the compact on migration."⁴⁹ He used rhetoric that demonized migrants as criminals, as follows:

"If we control those who enter our homes, why should it be different with Brazil as a nation,"

"We are only one country, one homeland, only one nation, only one green, and yellow heart,"

"Minorities have to bend down to the majority, they should either adapt or simply vanish,"⁵⁰

Framing the "people" against those responsible for the crisis is one of the crucial steps in Moffitt's model of the "performance" of the crisis. After identifying a particular failure to build up a sense of crisis and link it into a broader framework as a matter of life and death in the first and second steps, the demonization of social groups takes place in the third step to construct an identity.⁵¹ "Outsiders" are immigrants or ethnic minorities in the United States and Europe today. In Brazil, where racial and class discrimination intersects, moral panics are created mainly through race fears, targeting Afro-descendants. On the other hand, nativism serves as a performative mechanism through which Bolsonaro establishes a sense of crisis as if the immigrants are such a massive threat to the nation's identity.

Messianism and Christofascism: Leadership as a Mythical Construction

Once a failure is particularized and the sense of crisis is propagated, the next important step is to present oneself as being "beyond" ideology or politics, thus having the only solution.⁵² During the campaign of Jair Messias Bolsonaro, whose middle name means "messiah," his followers also called him "O Mito" ("The Myth"), as someone who would be above good and evil and a "savior" who would rescue the country.⁵³ According to De Paula et al., it seems to evoke "the myth of the king by the grace of God," which depends on the arrival of a king, chosen by God, "who would fulfill God's purpose for the Brazilian nation."⁵⁴ On this basis, the faith of an idealized and fantastic-natured character who takes all the responsibility for social transformations prevents members of society from taking responsibility. This motive constantly reappears in Brazilians' relations with politicians and is rooted in the national

48 Mrittika Shamsuddin et al., "Integration of Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in Brazil", World Bank Policy Research Working Paper, No 9605, March 2021, p. 4-5, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/35358/Integration-of-Venezuelan-Refugees-and-Migrants-in-Brazil.pdf?sequence=1> (Accessed 11 May 2021).

49 "Bolsonaro Pulls Brazil from U.N. Migration Accord", *New York Times*, 9 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/09/world/americas/bolsonaro-brazil-migration-accord.html> (Accessed 11 May 2021).

50 Filomeno and Vicino, "The Evolution of Authoritarianism and Restrictionism in Brazilian Immigration Policy", p. 9; Tamaki and Fuks, "Populism in Brazil's 2018 General Elections", p. 114-120.

51 Moffitt, "How to Perform Crisis", p. 198-201.

52 Ibid, p. 204.

53 Claudio Paixão Anastácio de Paula et al., "Comunicação, Informação e Imaginário no Processo Eleitoral Brasileiro: o 'Messias' Bolsonaro e o Mito do Rei pela Graça de Deus", *Prisma.com*, No 41, 2020, p. 102.

54 Ibid, p. 102.

cultural identity. Brazilians have a homogeneous representation of the country and themselves, which makes them believe in the “unity and indivisibility of the nation.”⁵⁵ The messianic relationship takes shape between the “elected leader” and the “elected people.”⁵⁶

The sanctification of a leader as a “king by the grace of God” can be found in the campaign of Bolsonaro, whose motto was “Brazil above everything, God above all.” Accordingly, this motto appeals to the voters who associate the candidate with the sovereign power of God and the Brazilian Nation, placing it as the only possible way to maintain the country’s sovereignty.⁵⁷ It also highlights the image of an “undivided nation just like a family where the ruler is the father who cares for everything.”⁵⁸ Bolsonaro’s presidency as an expression of God’s will requires complete obedience to the leader and urges the nation to unite morally under his authority.⁵⁹

Messianism provides a basis for politicians to manipulate religious language and symbols. This can be dangerously attractive in filling or replacing “the loss of sense of the masses of people,” disappointed with the uncertainties embedded in the social structure, which was regarded as more stable and safe in the past.⁶⁰ In Brazil, messianic sentiment gradually developed among evangelicals from the Bible, giving the building an expectation that the nation would be blessed if all—particularly their prominent leader—became evangelicals.⁶¹ Religious expressions, mainly presented in the walls of Pentecostal churches during the campaign of Bolsonaro, contributed to creating an image that longed for the rise of evangelicals.⁶² Three years of recession, unemployment, political crisis, and corruption scandals set the stage for Bolsonaro to address a “religious solution” to Brazil’s problems. As Junior and Bianco indicated, mythical narratives based on a homeland to be rescued from the “enemy” are directly linked to the moments of crisis and social tension.⁶³ In this respect, the PT and Lula serve as “evidence” that the danger is real and imminent.⁶⁴ The messiah then redeems the “good people” from the corrupt attributed to the *petistas*.⁶⁵ Conservative Christianity emerges as an effective tool to mobilize opposition to the PT’s new-developmental policies. Bolsonaro’s mythological narrative, in its fight against the “dark forces” represented by the left, relies on the use of stereotypes and prejudices rooted in history, culture, and religion.

A Pentecostal “new messianism” arose in these conditions, also called “Christofascism.”⁶⁶ The term coined by the German theologian Dorothee Sölle refers to the emergence of a character who

55 Ibid, p. 105-106.

56 João Ferreira Dias, “O Messias já Chegou e Livrará ‘As Pessoas de Bem’ dos Corruptos: Messianismo Político e Legitimação Popular, os Casos Bolsonaro e André Ventura”, *Police*, No 2, 2020, p. 51.

57 De Paula et al., “Comunicação, Informação e Imaginário no Processo Eleitoral Brasileiro”, p. 118.

58 Ibid, p. 118.

59 Morelock and Narita, “A Dialectical Constellation of Authoritarian Populism”, p. 100.

60 Maria Fatima Pinho de Oliveira, “¿Sacralización Política o Mesianismo? Los liderazgos Políticos de Néstor Kirchner, Hugo Chávez, Donald Trump y Jair Bolsonaro”, *Tla-Melaua. Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, No 47, p. 330.

61 Ibid, p. 357.

62 Ibid, p. 357.

63 Aryovaldo de Castro Azevedo Junior and Erica Cristina Verderio Bianco, “O Processo de Mitificação de Bolsonaro: Messias, Presidente do Brasil”, *Revista ECO-Pós*, Vol. 22, No 2, 2019, p. 106.

64 Ibid, p. 106.

65 Dias, “O Messias já Chegou e Livrará ‘As Pessoas de Bem’ dos Corruptos”, p. 52.

66 Daniel Rocha, “Faça-se na Terra um Pedaco do Céu’: Perspectivas Messiânicas na Participação dos Pentecostais na Política Brasileira”, *Perspectiva Teológica*, Vol. 52, No 3, 2020, p. 607; Wagner Lopes Sanchez and Glair Alonso Arruda, “Novas Faces do Cristofascismo no Governo de Jair Bolsonaro”, *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira*, Vol. 80, No 316, 2020, p. 353-372.

presents himself as the expected messiah and responds to the widespread longing.⁶⁷ Christofascism designates the leader who identifies himself with totalitarian ideals and emerges in the Brazilian context with the rise of Bolsonaro's neoconservative political agenda allied to evangelism as a conservative reaction to the *petista* movement.⁶⁸ Social movements assumed to be related to the "socialist agenda that rejects family and religious values" are also the target of reaction. "Pentecostalization" of Christianity thus has been central in consolidating power against opponents and blaming any ideological divergence from neoliberal economics. In May 2019, then-foreign minister Ernesto Araújo compared Bolsonaro to Jesus, declaring that "the stone that the builders rejected, became the cornerstone of the building, the building of the new Brazil."⁶⁹ The expression "cornerstone" became symbolic of the political process that legitimizes the single individual role as a "savior of the homeland" and supported the new policy for a "new Brazil."⁷⁰ The "new Brazil" is where Pentecostals have increasingly felt "at home."⁷¹ As they identified themselves as representatives of values of the "Christian and conservative majority" of the Brazilian people, they began to believe in the possibility of influencing the direction of the nation through an antagonistic form of politics that feed the expectations of rescuing the dream of the "Christian nation."⁷² Soon after the election of Bolsonaro, Araújo said, "God is back, and the nation is back: a nation with God; God through the nation."⁷³

Symbolic-religious elements have been central in consolidating authoritarian populism, especially in Brazil and the United States, where conservative Christianity resonated with free-market ideology and emerged as a political force in opposition to the left.⁷⁴ Evangelical churches in the United States have served as "conservative cultural centers" promoting the idea that "American values are under attack" and blaming leftist ideology.⁷⁵ Donald Trump received more Catholic support than previous Republicans, with his religious rhetoric and promises to defend Evangelical churches from attacks on Christianity.⁷⁶ On the other hand, religious discourses employed by Erdoğan in Turkey, Modi in India, and Netanyahu in Israel have constructed antidemocratic populist movements through the exclusive definition of political community and erosion of individual rights.⁷⁷ European democracies also experienced a recent wave of right-wing populism that mobilized religion through attachment to mythical symbols of fighting the enemy.⁷⁸ Religion seems functional in constructing the populist divide between "us" and "them," increasing the popular appeal and responding to the crisis in different contexts.

67 Sanchez and Arruda, "Novas Faces do Cristofascismo", p. 359.

68 Ibid, p. 359.

69 Guilherme Mazui et al, "Ministro Compara Bolsonaro a Jesus ao Chamar Presidente de 'Pedra Angular' do 'Novo Brasil'", *Globo*, 3 May 2019, <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2019/05/03/ministro-compara-bolsonaro-a-jesus-ao-chamar-presidente-de-pedra-angular-do-novo-brasil.ghtml> (Accessed: 12 May 2020).

70 Sanchez and Arruda, "Novas Faces do Cristofascismo", p. 355.

71 Rocha, "Faça-se na Terra um Pedaco do Céu", p. 627.

72 Ibid, p. 627.

73 Ernesto Araújo, "Now We Do", *The New Criterion*, Vol. 37, No 5, January 2019, <https://newcriterion.com/issues/2019/1/now-we-do> (Accessed 20 May 2021).

74 Christopher Craig Brittain, "Donald Trump and the Stigmata of Democracy: Adorno and the Consolidation of a Religious Racket", Jeremiah Morelock (ed.), *How to Critique Authoritarian Populism*, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2021, p. 380.

75 Ibid, p. 380.

76 Ibid, p. 367.

77 Julius Maximilian Rogenhofer and Ayala Panievsky, "Antidemocratic Populism in Power: Comparing Erdoğan's Turkey with Modi's India and Netanyahu's Israel", *Democratization*, Vol. 27, No 8, 2020, p. 1403.

78 For case studies from Britain, France, Poland, Italy, Austria, Hungary, the Netherlands, see. Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, Olivier Roy (Eds.), *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion*, London, Hurst& Company, 2016.

“Cultural Marxism” as a Conspiracist Assault on Opponents and Institutions

Conspiratorial thinking, which offers simple solutions to address complex problems and points to the “enemies of the people” with provocative rhetoric, is generally assumed to be directly linked to populist discourses.⁷⁹ As Bergmann and Balta et al. argue, conspiracy theories become more valuable when populists come into power since they find themselves in trouble when they cannot implement the “simple remedy.” They need to “reframe the identity of the corrupt elites” to be able to blame the institutions for preventing the leader from implementing “the will of the people.”⁸⁰ According to Moffitt, attacking and simplifying the existing political system is the main aim of the populist performance of crisis.⁸¹ Conspiracies are functional as a simplification method and as a tactic to perpetuate the sense of crisis and prolong panic and concern about the crisis, which is a final step in Moffitt’s performance model.

In the case of Brazil, a classical far-right conspiracy theory known as “cultural Marxism” has become a new conspiratorial instrument to Bolsonaro’s assault on both opponents and institutions. Using conspiracies and speculations to deconstruct the image of *petistas*, and disqualify the press and academics, has been one mechanism through which Bolsonaro mobilizes social anxieties and creates moral panics. As a global conspiracy theory, cultural Marxism is commonly found in the discourse of the “alt-right movement.” Since the 1990s, cultural Marxism, together with “political correctness,” has been used as a tool to blame the left for “destroying Western traditions and values” such as the nation, nationalism, family, patriarchy, hierarchy, and Christianity in favor of the emergence of a cosmopolitan global order.⁸² This hateful discourse frames left-wing politics as an “ideological disease” and mobilizes hate against those who want to build their hegemony in civil society. Since the conspiracy centers on the idea of “cultural Marxists ruling the big institutions” without any empirical ground beneath, it is also instrumental in constructing a perception about the “corrupt elite.”⁸³ Therefore, as a tool of authoritarian populism, the cultural Marxism conspiracy serves to legitimate historical revisionism based on the promise of “bringing the nation back to its people.” It is apparent in the discourse of Bolsonaro, who has frequently expressed nostalgia for the period of military rule. “Brazil will return to being a country free of ideological constrictions and start to free itself from socialism and political correctness,” he said after being sworn in before Congress.⁸⁴

Firstly, the cultural Marxism conspiracy became an effective tool to demonize Lula and the PT. In early 2019, Ernesto Araújo described Lula as a “globalism’s guy” who enforced cultural Marxism, which is “directed from within a seemingly liberal and democratic system, achieved through corruption, intimidation, and thought control.”⁸⁵ The polemist Olavo de Carvalho can be considered Brazil’s most thriving example of how one could use social media to spread conspiracy theories to millions of

79 Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism. A very Short Introduction*, p. 82; Bergmann, *Neo-Nationalism*, p. 41.

80 Bergmann, *Neo-Nationalism*, p. 41; Evren Balta et al., “Populist Attitudes and Conspiratorial Thinking”, Forthcoming at *Party Politics*, (Pre-copy-edited version), 2021, p. 6.

81 Moffitt, “How to Perform Crisis”, p. 206.

82 Jérôme Jamin, “Cultural Marxism: A Survey”, *Religion Compass*, Vol. 12, No 1-2, 2018, p. 7.

83 Tanner Mirrlees, “The Alt-right’s Discourse on ‘Cultural Marxism’: A Political Instrument of Intersectional Hate”, *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice*, Vol. 39, No 1, 2018, p. 57-58.

84 “Jair Bolsonaro: Brazil’s New Far-Right President Urges Unity”, *BBC*, 1 January 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-46720899> (Accessed 20 May 2021).

85 Ernesto Araújo, “Now We Do”.

people in the guise of scientific knowledge.⁸⁶ By addressing cultural Marxists as the “agents of a secret plot to destroy Brazilian culture,” he often propagates that the *petistas* are behind the country’s degeneration.⁸⁷ Contrary to the U.S. case, where cultural Marxism may refer to Trump opponents, Islamists, Black Life Matters activists, Democrats, moderate Republicans, the media, the academy, the “Deep State,” or even TV comedians,⁸⁸ the target of conspiracy is *petistas* in Brazil.

These conspiracies were reinforced by the “fake news” spreading through WhatsApp during the 2018 elections, which occurred in a “typical post-truth context.”⁸⁹ According to the Coding Rights report *Data and Elections in Brazil 2018*, “in a sample of over a hundred thousand political images shared via WhatsApp, 56 percent of the most-shared images were misleading, and only 8 percent of the 50 most widely shared images were considered fully truthful.”⁹⁰ Through the fake news and manipulation of the mainstream media, it was conceived that there was a “gang” ruling the country, even though several parties have integrated the corruption scandal, leaving little room for the emergence of an alternative version of the facts.⁹¹ According to this narrative, widespread anxieties about the nation’s future could be eradicated by the defeat of cultural Marxists. The projection of an ideal future in authoritarian populist narratives is grounded on the conspiracist assaults on political correctness.⁹²

Secondly, the public education system has been at the heart of the cultural Marxism conspiracy, centered on the idea that cultural Marxists rule the cultural industries and use the education system to spread their politically correct ideology. Bolsonaro’s official fight against cultural Marxism began in the first months of his rule, when then-minister of education, Abraham Weintraub, announced that they would remove cultural Marxism from Brazilian universities.⁹³ In May 2019, Weintraub reported that he had cut public university funding 30 percent, a move motivated by “complaints about partisan activities on campus,” which can be considered a “witch-hunting tactic.”⁹⁴ Furthermore, Bolsonaro has been leading people to question the educational materials of universities and public schools, in which “Marxist ideas threatening the traditional family values have become dominant.”⁹⁵ Bolsonaro claims that PT’s funding for underprivileged university students is a secret plan to convert students to Marxism.⁹⁶

86 Beatriz Buarque, “How Brazil’s Far-Right ‘Active Knowledge’ Industry Supports Jair Bolsonaro”, *Open Democracy*, 10 March 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/jair-bolsonaro-brazil-far-right-knowledge-industry-en/> (Accessed 20 May 2021).

87 Andrew Woods, “The Cultural Marxism Conspiracy Thrives in Bolsonaro’s Brazil”, *Fair Observer*, 16 October 2019, <https://www.fairobserver.com/insight/cultural-marxism-conspiracy-far-right-jair-bolsonaro-brazil-latin-america-news-00054/> (Accessed 20 May 2021).

88 Jeet Heer, “Trump’s Racism and the Myth of ‘Cultural Marxism’”, *The New Republic*, 15/08/2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/144317/trumps-racism-myth-cultural-marxism> (Accessed 3 February 2022).

89 Gabriele Cosentino, *Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order: The Global Dynamics of Misinformation*, Cham, Palgrave Pivot, 2020, p. 126-127.

90 Ibid, p. 126.

91 Junior and Bianco, “O Processo de Mitificação de Bolsonaro”, p. 106.

92 Oliveira and Maia, “REDES BOLSONARISTAS”, p. 108.

93 “Novo Ministro da Educação, Weintraub Defende Expurgo do ‘Marxismo Cultural’”, *Folha de São Paulo*, 8 April 2019, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/educacao/2019/04/novo-ministro-da-educacao-weintraub-defende-expurgo-do-marxismo-cultural.shtml> (Accessed 20 May 2021).

94 Woods, “The Cultural Marxism Conspiracy Thrives in Bolsonaro’s Brazil”.

95 Buarque, “How Brazil’s Far-Right ‘Active Knowledge’ Industry Supports Jair Bolsonaro”.

96 Woods, “The Cultural Marxism Conspiracy Thrives in Bolsonaro’s Brazil”.

Cultural Marxism is also used to justify the need for “a new educational agenda free from the illusion that individuals have equal rights.”⁹⁷ For this purpose, Eduardo Bolsonaro, the president’s son, established the *Instituto Liberal-Conservador*, promoting traditional family values, the right to self-defense, and sovereignty. This institute supports Bolsonaro’s mission to “take back the country from the perverted left” and spread conspiracies as scientific knowledge.⁹⁸ It seems to provide an institutional basis for Brazil’s “national rebirth” as a “conservative, anti-globalist, nationalist country” in the direction of Araújo’s definition.

Conclusion

This article shows that emotional processes that attract people to authoritarian populism in times of crisis are shaped by the contradiction between the difficulty of tolerating uncertainties and the comfort of addressing something or someone specifically as the source of threat. The insecurity-fed anxieties in polarized societies mainly feed the authoritarian character of contemporary right-wing populists. They construct the fear of a specific enemy and provoke feelings of hostility and hatred to manipulate ethnic, religious, and cultural differences and gain political support. By examining the Brazilian case, the article asserted that the legitimacy of authoritarian populists is grounded in fears, myths, and speculations. Three mechanisms addressed in the article are rooted in Brazilian history. However, the economic downfall, corruption scandals, political crisis, and growing violence created a unique opportunity for Bolsonaro to mobilize *anti-petista* opposition and establish his hegemony through a climate of paranoia, which combines constructed threats and manipulations with social concerns.

Understanding the mechanisms through which Bolsonaro manipulates fear and propagates a sense of crisis will help explain how he consolidates power in the age of uncertainty we live. In this article, nativism, messianism, and conspiracism are the main mechanisms that justify authoritarian means to defeat the “corrupt elite” and build a new homogeneous nation with no threats and dangers. Reinforced by Bolsonaro’s polarizing and “politically incorrect” rhetoric, each of these mechanisms is directly linked to the moments of crisis and social tensions and urges the nation to unite morally in complete obedience under the rule of “God’s representative” for the hope of a better future.

Authoritarian populism under these conditions seems to have great potential to construct an alternative political reality that offers easy solutions to people who are stressed about the future of their country. Bolsonaro may not stay in power, but he already managed to bring traditional conservative values into the political center, consolidate the Evangelical support, demonize *petistas*, and legitimate neoliberal agenda through the prioritization of the economy during the pandemic. The mobilization capacity of social movement actors, the mechanisms of collective resilience, and the ability of collective action to struggle for social justice and equality will determine the limits of the appeal of Bolsonarism in Brazil.

97 Buarque, “How Brazil’s Far-Right ‘Active Knowledge’ Industry Supports Jair Bolsonaro”.

98 Ibid.

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