

**SOCIEDADES
POLARIZADAS ?**

**DESAFIOS
PARA A
SOCIOLOGIA**

t authoritã
temporari

XII CONGRESSO
PORTUGUÊS DE SOCIOLOGIA

4 - 6 ABRIL 2023

CONVENTO DE SÃO FRANCISCO – FACULDADE DE ECONOMIA DA UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA

XII Congresso Português de Sociologia

*Sociedades Polarizadas?
Desafios para a Sociologia*

Coimbra, 4 a 6 de março de 2023

Thematic Section/Area:

Sociology of Religion

Religious fundamentalism and resurgent authoritarianism: *Rethinking politics and religion in contemporary Brazil*

DIPATI, Yans Sumaryani; GEDRED, PUC-RIO, Brazil

Abstract

The specter of authoritarianism has always haunted the Brazilian political scene. In the 20th century, the country went through two authoritarian governments: during the regime of Getúlio Vargas (1930-1945) and the military regime (1964-1984). There are mainly two generally accepted sociological interpretations of the roots of the authoritarianism in the Brazilian political landscape. The first interpretation attributes it to the Iberian heritage in its political culture (HOLLANDA 1936; FAÓRO 1958), and the second one points back to the agrarian elite's grip on power (Reis 1982). What has long been neglected, however, is the new and determinant role of religious ideology, the rapidly growing Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups whose role was decisive in the victory of Jair Bolsonaro in the presidential election in 2018, and his close reelection in 2022. This phenomenon signals an intricate entanglement between religious fundamentalism and resurgent authoritarianism in Brazil, which will be the focus of investigation in this paper.

Keywords: Religious fundamentalism; (neo)pentecostalism; authoritarianism; extreme right.

XII-APS-81193

Brazil and the political scenario of pre-election 2018

The analysis of the complexity of the elements that led to the results of the Brazilian presidential election in 2018 could not be comprehensive without considering the national political dynamics that preceded it. Looking within the temporal prism of that moment that gave rise to Jair Bolsonaro as a national political phenomenon in Brazil, several factors converged to form an atypical political situation. Firstly, anti-PT (anti-Workers' Party) sentiment was very strong due to corruption scandals involving important key figures at the top of the party. These scandals were exhaustively exploited by right wing politicians for political purposes with the help of mainstream media, especially during the election period, creating a strong association between corruption and the left wing, most particularly with the Workers' Party (PT) in general public opinion. In this way, they intentionally covered up the fact that there were more politicians from the center and right field—PP and PSDB came first in the list—until then caught in the corruption scandal (LIMONGI, 2023).

In spite of all the media massacre and the mobilization in the streets that took place since 2013 (LIMONGI 2023, ALONSO 2023), the Brazilian right wing failed to strengthen itself as a viable alternative to the left. Instead, an extreme-right strand, that already began to take shape following the 2013 demonstrations, was born from within the right wing itself, but presenting itself as an anti-system movement characterized by their staunch critique of the political system considered as fundamentally corrupt from within. For that reason, they vie for an overthrow of the political system and its democratic institutions as the only solution to the social and political problem. No wonder, this groups flirted constantly with coup d'état and dreamed of the return of military regime. It has thus a character of an anarchist movement with an authoritarian vocation, a kind of anti-structure in Turner's term (TURNER 1966; CESARINO 2023).

It is also worth mentioning in the meantime that in this process social media already gained an extraordinary relevance as a means of information, and of course disinformation, the so called platformization of the media, which created a favorable environment for the fake news industry to spread disinformation, hatred, intolerance and manipulation of public

opinion for political benefits (CALEJON 2021). In other words, the social media as infrastructure considered for long to have but peripheral function in the reproduction of social life now came to occupy a determinant role in the rearrangement of the political field. It makes possible clusterization of the public. More still, the platformization of media made possible the emergence of a self-enclosed parallel universe resistant to critical and open debates characteristic of a democratic society, a kind of bubble that is constantly revived and stirred with misinformation and conspiracy theories.

In the following elections, far right groups knew how to appropriate the potential of the social media for political purposes. And precisely this new, radicalized right that, knowing the potential of social networks, explored the strong feeling of anger and resentment installed in Brazilian society. It was a symptom of a far more deep-rooted resentment among the popular as well as middle class groups. As to the first, this sentiment emerged among those incapable of getting access to goods and services produced by the modernizing process in the country. Among the middle class and upper class groups, the same sentiment of resentment was provoked by the ascension of a certain portion of lower class to goods and services thanks to the politics of redistribution during left government, considered by these as privileges, such as universal access to higher education, better housing and so on.

Bolsonaro knows how to give vent to these latent sentiments among certain portion of the population, radicalizing it with an authoritarian and extreme right discourse. He was definitely not the first to propagate the extreme-right discourse, rather he brought it out from the closet and gave it a spotlight. Surfing on the Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal morality, he fueled public resentment with a conspiracy theory against family and christian traditional values, “Deus, Pátria, Família”. His moralist discourse against LGBTQA+ and reproductive rights goes well with the conservative religious groups both from pentecostal and neopentecostal branch.

With the collaboration of the traditional media, a kind of messianic dream of a national hero, the savior of the country was created. This imaginary was installed and gained even greater force firstly in the judiciary with the *Lava Jato* operation that put behind bars important political leaders, including the ex-president, Lula da Silva. Thanks to its performance and its mediatic reproduction, the task force projected the then judge in

the 13rd Court of Curitiba, responsible for the operation, Sérgio Moro and the attorney Deltan Dallagnol into the national political scene with a messianic aura.

In the context of the 2018 elections, Jair Bolsonaro was launched as a candidate in this same messianic perspective, to purify politics of all the filth of corruption strongly associated with the left wing, with all its ideological derivatives. He projected himself as the hero who was going to “end everything that was there”, a kind of Messiah—an imagery that was even more associated with him after the stabbing episode in Juiz de Fora, MG—in modern times that would embody the people themselves and that would dialogue with them directly without an intermediary, what Pierre Rossanvallon (2020) calls “representation-incarnation”.

The idea projects the image of the represented people as a homogeneous unit with a single will, which can only exist through a single representative that synthesizes its values as Christian Lynch puts it:

“Populism is based on three characteristics: the appeal “to the people” against “the elite”, “the politically incorrect” and the perception that there is a crisis in the world, a risk of rupture or an imminent threat. The first characteristic evokes the conflict between the authenticity of the interests of the people against the representatives of political elites ensconced in institutions. In the second case, the appeal to the politically incorrect would be a performative expression of a return to common sense against the rigid, rational, technocratic and falsely composed behavior that would mark the traditional political elites. The third element refers to the rhetorical use of an imminent danger, materialized by foreign immigration, economic difficulties, injustices, external threats, the risk of social change and identity values. A danger that would require exceptional measures of public safety, but that the elites or the political system itself would either not be able to face, or would instrumentalize for their own benefit” [author’s translation] (LYNCH & CASSIMIRO 2022, p.12).

The imagery of a messiah, a kind of savior of the homeland, fits perfectly into the religious imaginary of a savior in the judeo-christian tradition, and most probably for that very reason, gained significant adherence from among religious public, most particularly

the Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal voters. It is worth noting here that this religious phenomenon is not exclusive to the evangelical churches. It can also be observed in the conservative wave within the Catholic Church which gained stronger adherence, among others, within the pentecostal movements proliferated in innumerable new self-declared “religious communities” spread across the country. In spite of some differences of Pentecostalism in the Catholic and Evangelical churches, they have some theological visions in common, such as a messianic vision of a savior of the people. On the concrete programmatic level, their moral and political platform are marked by four characteristics in common in relation to the economy, security, society and morals (MACHADO & BURITY 2014; ALMEIDA 2017).

As regards the economic issues, they have more propensity toward a liberal approach, less State intervention and more private initiative. State regulation in the economy is normally considered to be an unnecessary intervention, in line with neoliberal credo, which brings about more problems than solution. They foster a spirit of entrepreneurship. The individual merit is encouraged religiously as they believe that one’s financial success depends exclusively on individual effort. On the contrary, they consider it necessary for the State to intervene in public security. More security means impeccably and rigorously more repressive State. Investment in policing, police equipment, construction of prisons is considered essential, including lowering the age of criminal responsibility. Increased punishment and its severity are considered as the effective remedy against criminality.

With respect to morality, they defend a more conservative morality understood basically as restricted to sexual-related issues. Based on this narrowly conceived morality, they condemn reproductive rights such as women’s right to choice and to secure abortion, as well as LGBTQA+ right to same sex marriage. In so far as these political platforms are believed to be derived from God’s own commandment, as an unquestionable theological assumption, they are taken for granted as universal and immutable giving rise most frequently to intolerant attitudes and authoritarian behavior both in private and public sphere. The narrowly conceived Christian morality is considered universally valid and consequently accepted as normative principles regulating public life.

Indeed, the political community is seen as an extension of the faith community itself. The boundaries between the private sphere of faith and the public sphere of politics, which is eminently characterized by plurality, are blurred, or rather, the private sphere gains prevalence over the public sphere obfuscating the latter to the point of inexistence (ARENDR 1958, HABERMAS 1981, BROWN 2018). It is no coincidence that Christian moral norms such as those regarding reproductive rights and homosexuality are imposed as equally valid in the field of politics. It is precisely in this respect that the frequently considered as separate fields, the economy and the sacred intersect in a mutual collaboration, that is, between Pentecostalism and neo-Pentecostalism on the one side, and neoliberal political economy on the other, insofar as neoliberalism promotes the expansion of the private over the public, as correctly intuits Wendy Brown:

These practices of privatization do more than challenge principles and practices of equality and antidiscrimination. Expanding the “personal, protected sphere” is also a means of ushering family values, ordinances, and claims into public spaces heretofore organized by democratic law and norms. The social and the public are thus not only economized but familialized by neoliberalism: together these shifts challenge the principles of equality, secularism, pluralism, and inclusion at the heart of modern democratic society, allowing them to be replaced by what Hayek termed the “traditional moral values” of the “personal, protected sphere” (BROWN 2018, p.18).

In addition to that, there is a temporal aspect presupposed by both the messianic vision and neoliberalism pointed out in Cesarino’s analysis (2023). It sheds light on the immediate dimension of time which prioritizes the here and the now of consumption and pleasure, the private dimension of time which drags itself on lazily, and a distant and inscrutable future that can only be imagined as messianic or apocalyptic visions which contrasts the present condition (CESARINO 2023, p.70). In other words, both neoliberalism and the Pentecostalism/Neo-Pentecostalism converge on the paradox of temporality as a tension between the immediacy of private life and the inscrutable messianic future, a rather catastrophic one, for which one can do nothing. One needs but

a messianic salvation, a divine intervention. In line with Brown's analysis, Cesarino concludes:

“... the collapse of contexts between public and private leads to a friend-enemy bifurcation in which the public field of politics is encompassed by the private logic of communities of destiny shared only by those recognized as “friends”, and who are seen as the source of life, value, authenticity and truth: the people, the nation, the family, the church, etc” [*author's translation*] (CESARINO 2023, p.72).

At the other end of the bifurcation is the specter of communism, hated for being closely linked to atheism, but also for being associated with all bad things in public life: corruption, violence, dictatorship, manipulation and so on. In short, it is a supreme representation of evil. It defines an ultimate dividing line between “us” and “them”, “friends” and “enemy”, “well-intentioned” and “bad people”. A populist strategy that divides and polarizes to the extreme (ROSANVALLON 2020). This polarization results in a relation of bifurcated recognition in which it is only those of the same opinion and considered to be members of the group worthy attention and existence (CESARINO 2023). It is thus continuously fueled by the feeling of enmity towards those classified as “they” and who, therefore, deserve to be eliminated, including through violence. It is no coincidence that Bolsonaro keeps on nurturing this distinction, first and foremost by constantly and systematically producing in the imagination of his fanatical supporters the ghost of communism and everything that incarnates it. The distinction between “us” and “them” in this sense rests on the further separation between us-the patriots and them-the communists to be eliminated.

“In conspiratorial publics, true and false cease to be terms whose difference is encoded by the shared matrix of scientific epistemology to cross a transformational threshold in which truth becomes the structuring background of another layer of reality from which normative society, which also appears as an existential threat, is excluded as a domain of lies, manipulation, hypocrisy” [*author's translation*] (CESARINO 2023, p.135).

Along with this, he encourages a strong appeal to an intense hatred against enemies and disproportionate calcified passion for the “Captain”, Bolsonaro’s nickname, by manipulating images of his eating in the street or the stabbing he suffered in Juiz de Fora (MG) before the 2018 elections around.

Bolsonaro was able to maintain a direct relationship with his supporters through them. More than that, this direct relationship has created a self-enclosed parallel universe, a kind of bubble that constantly needs stirring with misinformation and conspiracy theories. The latter in particular operates as an agitator of the feeling of coherence and rationality, but which is in fact nothing less than pure passionate delirium:

“Les sentiments d’opacité et d’impuissance publique que ressentent de nombreux citoyens s’inscrivent du même coup souvent dans des tentatives compensatrices de rationalisation imaginaire. Les visions conspirationnistes du monde correspondent en effet à une tentative de restaurer une cohérence dans un monde ressenti comme indéchiffrable et menaçant. Ces théories du complot prétendent démontrer que derrière l’opacité et la complexité apparentes du monde politique ou économique réel se cache un ordre du pouvoir en fait parfaitement simple et rationnel” (ROSANVALLON 2020, p.70).

Among reactionary Catholics, the dream for the return of the glorious medieval times in which the Catholic Church held undisputed power in the religious and secular field survives, while the evangelical neo-Pentecostal strand preaches for the restoration of order, that is to say, the so-called “good” customs, promoting “the apocalyptic crusade for the salvation of a Western Judeo-Christian civilization”, marked by anti-enlightenment, anti-renaissance, and rejection of pluralism, tolerance, human rights, the rule of law and secularism. Catholic reactionarism is thus not simply about interrupting the “revolutionary process”, but rather “to restore a hierarchique, catholic, with a medieval vocation, which top should be occupied not by monarchs, but by the pope as the judge of all monarchies” (LYNCH & CASSIMIRO 2022, p.18). More recently, the concrete example of this return would be the period of military dictatorship in 1964 where the supposed “order” was restored. This restoration, therefore, presupposes a project of power, where Bolsonaro became its political-ideological representation.

Bolsonaro, extreme-right and religious fundamentalism

The election of Jair Bolsonaro as president of Brazil in 2018 marked a break in the democratic process in Brazil since redemocratization. It is worth mentioning first of all that from the post-redemocratization period, elections have always been a dispute between two parties, PSDB and PT, which came to power alternately since 1992. Although they have their ideological differences, both parties have as their central platform to modernize the project to Brazil within the institutional framework of a democratic State. PSDB maintains a liberal vision in economic policy, while PT linked to social movements, trade unions and the progressist Catholic Church (BARROS 2022) emphasizes the strengthening of the central role of the State as a protagonist in reducing inequalities, and therefore aims to reformulate the relationship between market, work and State. Bolsonaro, who was elected by the PSL, displaced the PSDB-PT hegemonic axis as protagonists in the dispute between right and left wing in national politics (LYNCH & CASSIMIRO 2022). PSL makes up a political bloc in the Brazilian Parliament called *Centrão*, a group of physiological parties that have no ideological vision, but simply guided by political pragmatism based on their regional or corporatist interests.

The arrival of Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency demonstrates that in addition to the old ideological dispute between the agenda of equality on the left, and economic liberalism on the right, which lost its centrality in the electoral discourse to a certain extent, a new agenda came to make up the panorama of the dispute, and sometimes with more weight for certain sectors of society, especially the religious and conservative ones. It is a conservative agenda with a fundamentally religious orientation, such as the defense of “customs” and Christian morality, especially in matters related to sexual morality. Bolsonaro's victory in 2018 relied on the significant support of these groups that made up the majority of his voters and conservative Catholics. Comparing the two candidates in that presidential election, Bolsonaro won with 58.709.702 against Fernando Haddad of the Workers' Party, with 46.129.051 votes. In terms of religion, Bolsonaro still won among Catholics with 29.941.948 against Haddad's 28.767.754. However, the weight of evangelical votes was more considerable in favor of Bolsonaro than the leftist candidate,

Haddad, with a difference of more than eleven million in evangelical votes and just a little more than 164.000 in Catholic votes. Among evangelicals, Bolsonaro won 21.701.622 against 9.750.004 for Haddad. This considerable electoral advantage of Bolsonaro among evangelical voters was repeated in the 2022 elections against the left candidate, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, former president of Brazil from 2003 to 2010. Lula won the elections, but within a very narrow margin of victory with a difference of just over two million votes out of a total of 118.203.862. Among evangelical voters, Bolsonaro far outperformed Lula with a difference of 14.373.590 in favor of the former. This means that Bolsonaro's agenda of moral conservatism had significant appeal among evangelical voters rather than Catholics, as some polls show (ARAÚJO 2022).

During his government, Bolsonaro continued to rely to a considerable extent on the support of this religious parcel of Brazilian society, especially before his deplorable performance as a president during the pandemic, including involving corruption scandals, contrary to one of his campaign promises, the fight against corruption. At that time, he mobilized populist tactics, exploring personalism, made possible by social networks, such as his weekly lives, tweeter postings, or youtube interviews, in which he made continuous attempt to dismantle democratic and State institutions, declaring that he would not recognize any eventual victory of his adversary, and resorting to the use of violence, even inciting his followers to violence, in a clear move toward populist authoritarianism (LEVITSKY & ZIBLATT 2018).

It didn't take long for him to embark on an explicit authoritarian adventure, threatening democratic institutions such as the closing of the Congress, the Supreme Court, participating in demonstrations calling for military intervention, promoting a military parade and the like. Despite all this behavioral deviation of a leader in a democratic context, he managed to maintain a significant portion of his political support, especially in the ideological and religious hard core, fed by parallel channels of disinformation.

Apart from the bargaining dynamics in the Congress that saved him from the impeachment processes demanded by opposition parties representatives kept him in power until the end of his term despite impeachment demands from opposition parties representatives, there is no doubt that the ideologized sectors played a preponderant role in sustaining Bolsonaro's reactionary populism, among them the conservative religious

groups which became evident in the strong political support in the 2022 presidential elections as it was confirmed in the preference of the majority of evangelical voters and Catholic conservative groups. There is no doubt that it is not the only factor at play in the massive support from evangelical sectors to Bolsonaro. However, one cannot deny the relevance of the role of the fundamentalist religious wing in this process. The expressive voting of parliamentarians both in the Senate and in the Chamber of Deputies with a religious bias also confirms this same line of analysis. Bolsonaro's current party, Partido Liberal (PL) elected more than 129 deputies from 513 seats and 8 senators from 81 seats, not to mention parliamentarians from other parties. The most voted deputy in the 2022 elections in Brazil, Nikolas Ferreira (PL-MG), a self-declared loyal follower of Bolsonaro, did his campaign with the then President on his side. As Bolsonaro, he usually preaches homophobia and contempt for women. In his first pronouncement on the tribune of the Chamber of Deputies, on the Woman's International Day, March 08, 2023, he made an explicitly transphobic speech. Anyway, he was elected with no less than 1.47 million votes.

By way of conclusion

If Bolsonaro left power in 2022 after four years of authoritarian and obscurantist adventure leaving behind disastrous consequences, especially a great number of human toll during the pandemic of COVID-19, not to mention the dismantling of the democratic institutions, bolsonarism will still survive for years, maybe even for decades as it is no longer about the person of Jair Bolsonaro himself, but rather about a certain sort of worldview, an authoritarian and fascist one wrapped up, or better, justified on the basis of a religious discourse, a typical turn within the extreme-right populist ideology of the 21st century. The persistence of these anti-democratic tendencies calcified into a personal identity in Brazilians society for the next couple of years means an even more polarized society beyond the electoral period (NUNES 2023). This particular situation will definitely present considerable challenges to the actual government since beside the already known socio-economic issues, such as poverty, unemployment, and violence, a profoundly fragmented society will continuously undermine any attempt to reestablish

democracy in Brazil. Undeniably the religious fundamentalism both from Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal strands will continue to serve as a fertile ground for such a tendency. The maintenance and the reinforcement of democracy in Brazil will therefore depends to a significant extent on the capacity of democratic forces in Brazilian society to create channels of communication and dialogue with this sector of society.

References

- ALMEIDA, Ronaldo. “A onda quebrada. Evangélicos e conservadorismo”. 2017. Available on: <https://www.scielo.br/j/cpa/a/Cr9ShrVJbCWsDHMrxTDm3wb/abstract/?lang=pt>
Access: 20/05/2023.
- ALONSO, Angela. **Treze. A política de rua de Lula a Dilma**. São Paulo: Companhia de Letras, 2023.
- ALVES, José Estácio Diniz. Available in: <https://ihu.unisinos.br/categorias/188-noticias-2018/584304-o-voto-evangelico-garantiu-a-eleicao-de-jair-bolsonaro>
Access: 10/06/2023.
- ARENDDT, Hannah. **The human condition**. Chicago: Chicago Press, 2018 [1958].
- BARROS, Celso Rocha. **PT, uma história**. São Paulo: Companhia de Letras, 2022.
- BROWN, Wendy. “Neoliberalism’s Frankenstein. Authoritarian freedom in the twenty-first century democracies”. In: BROWN, Wendy, GORDON, Peter E. & PENSKY, Max. **Authoritarianism. Three inquiries in Critical Theory**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.
- CALEJON, Cesar Antônio. **A ascensão do bolsonarismo no Brasil do século XXI**. Curitiba: Kottter Editorial Ltd., 2021.
- CESARINO, Leticia & NUNES, Rodrigo. **O mundo do avesso. Verdade e política na era digital**. São Paulo: Ubu, 2022.
- FAORO, Raimundo. **Os donos do poder. Formação do patronato político brasileiro**. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Globo, 2012 [1958].
- HABERMAS, Jürgen. **Die Theorie des kommunikativen Handeln**. Band I & II. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981.

- HOLANDA, Sérgio Buarque. **As raízes do Brasil**. São Paulo: Companhia de Letras, 2015 [1936].
- LEVITSKY, Steven & ZIBLATT, Daniel. **How democracies die**. New York: Broadway Books, 2018.
- LIMONGI, Fernando. **Operação impeachment. Dilma Rousseff e o Brasil da Lava Jato**. São Paulo: Todavia, 2023.
- LYNCH, Cristian & CASSIMIRO, Paulo Henrique. **O populismo reacionário**. São Paulo: Editora Contracorrente, 2022.
- MACHADO, Maria das Dores Campos & BURITY, Joanildo. “A ascensão política dos evangélicos no Brasil na avaliação dos líderes religiosos”. 2014. Available on: <https://www.scielo.br/j/dados/a/9RpfDdGjSSGgtPHjGW97rPQ/> Access: 20/05/2023.
- NUNES, Felipe & TRAUMANN, Thomas. “A eleição que calcificou o país”. In: AVRITZER, Leonardo. **Eleições 2022 e a reconstrução da democracia no Brasil**. Pp. 20-29. Belo Horizonte: Autentica, 2023.
- ROSANVALLON, Pierre. **Le siècle du populisme. Histoire, théorie, critique**. Paris: Seuil, 2020.
- TURNER, Victor. **The ritual process. Structure and anti-structure**. London: Routledge, 1966.