



Beyond the functioning of Paulo Guedes' controversy regarding Brazilian housemaids

Para além do funcionamento argumentativo da polêmica anunciada por Paulo Guedes acerca das empregadas domésticas brasileiras

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Abstract: This article focuses on a very peculiar corpus to study, the controversy surrounding the statement made by the Minister of Economy, Paulo Guedes, in February of this year, about the exchange rate for the dollar and the supposed fact that housemaids were going to Disney. It is a question of analyzing a set of statements engendered in the flow of discourses that intertwined and clashed when resuming the theme exposed by the Minister. This study aims to understand those discourses as a place for inscription, solidification and propagation of that controversy in the public space. This study seeks to understand Guedes' statement not only as a place of conflict of opinions, of confrontations, of controversies, but also as a place of a resignification that engenders resistance. The clipping of the data allows not only to comprehend the functioning of the controversy but also, on the one hand, the role of media institutions and their responsibility in the public debate and, on the other hand, the role of resistance of the offended subjects. This analysis is anchored in Amossy (2017), about controversy as

an argumentative modality, and in Paveau and Costa (to be published), as far as the theory of re-signification is concerned.

Keywords: discourse; controversy; re-signification.

Resumo: Este artigo toma como objeto de estudo um *corpus* bastante peculiar, a polêmica em torno da afirmação do Ministro da Economia, Paulo Guedes, em fevereiro do ano de 2020, sobre a cotação do dólar e o suposto fato de as empregadas domésticas irem à Disney. Trata-se de analisar um conjunto de enunciados engendrados no fluxo de discursos que se entrecruzaram e se entrechocaram ao retomarem o tema exposto pelo ministro. Interessa compreendê-los enquanto lugar de inscrição, solidificação e propagação da polêmica no espaço público. Este estudo busca compreender a declaração de Guedes não só como lugar de conflito de opiniões, de enfrentamentos, de controversas, mas também de ressignificação que engendra resistência. O recorte dos dados permite, por um lado, compreender o funcionamento da polêmica, bem como a função das instituições midiáticas e sua responsabilidade no debate público e, por outro, o papel de resistência dos sujeitos ofendidos. A análise está ancorada em Amossy (2017), acerca da polêmica como modalidade argumentativa e em Paveau e Costa (no prelo) no que concerne à teoria da ressignificação.

Palavras-chave: discurso; polêmica; ressignificação.

Received on April 17, 2020

Accepted on June 15, 2020

1 Problematizing the matter...

On February 12, 2020, before the Covid-19 Pandemic, the exchange rate between the US dollar and the Brazilian Real reached its highest nominal value (R\$ 4.35) since the creation of the Real Plan in 1994. Faced with this situation, the Brazilian media – through its different devices – questioned the minister of Economy, Paulo Guedes, about the measures to try to contain the rampant rise in the exchange rate and calm down the spirits of the financial market. When responding to the press, Guedes, among other statements, said: “it is good that the dollar exchange is high, because with a low rate (...) even the maid was going to Disney, it was a free-for-all.” When spread by the mainstream media as a discourse, Guedes’ prejudiced statement became a point of conflict of opinion, confrontations, clashes and resistance. As we will demonstrate over the course of this study, that was a controversial speech that, in turn, contemplates a strong opposition of discourses on controversial

issues. To understand it, we selected a set of statements engendered in the flow of discourses that intersected and clashed when we resumed and analyzed it, initially in the light of the studies of Amossy (2017) and, in a second moment, from the ideas of Paveau and Costa (to be published). The data selected allows us to not only understand how this controversy worked, the role of media institutions and their responsibility in the public debate, but also how the actors offended in the controversy reacted to the comment made by minister Paulo Guedes.

Together with Amossy (2017), we remember that we currently live a kind of discursive paradox, because although controversy holds a bad reputation, it is considered as a partial and passionate speech, non-rational; on the one hand, the controversy holds preponderant place in the media, which displays it as a spectacle of verbal violence and, on the other, the controversy as dissent is what sustains democratic societies. We should also emphasize the fact that it is usually the media itself that foster the controversies. This is the case of the controversy analyzed here, one that spread uncontrollably in a few minutes; “it is in the media that the controversy spreads – and even elaborated in the public space” (AMOSSY, 2017, p.73). It is in the public space that the debate becomes fiercer and the opinions of various institutions and personalities are read and heard. Thus, the public space is a place of antagonism of opinions, where verbal confrontation manifests itself exponentially.

The confrontation of opinions is understood here as the action of placing two speeches in the presence of each other and, therefore, in relation to each other, thus allowing an appreciation by comparison. In other words, controversy has the social function of managing verbal confrontation. If rhetoric, as Amossy (2017) recalls, is a search for consensus – to agree on something reasonable –, agreement is far from always being possible in plural democracies. Dissent is a part of public debates, not even laws put an end to it. Dissent remains in debates and resurfaces whenever possible and in the most varied ways. Therefore, in a society divided by interests of various natures, controversy does not lead to agreement, but guarantees the right to adversarial proceedings. Thus, the controversy presumes a *face-to-face* situation and becomes, in a more particular sense, a debate that allows each one (Proponent/Opponent) to expose and defend their point of view, in view of the views of the other participants. It is, therefore, the activity that consists of bringing forth arguments in favor of one’s thesis and against the adverse thesis

that builds the controversial speech. Thus, controversy is undoubtedly marked by dissent, by enunciative litigation, that is, by the presence of antagonistic discourses that, although in dialogue, find no consensus but mostly dissent. In addition to and further than that, controversial discourse and interaction fulfill many functions.

They denounce, protest, call to action and, more generally, maintain, in the mode of dissent, communication in public space between factions whose views are sometimes so distant from each other that any contact seems to become impossible (AMOSSY, 2017, p. 100).

Several aspects could be addressed in this article regarding the controversy in question and its intense repercussion in media. The material is vast and quite interesting from a discursive point of view; so vast that it would undoubtedly fit in a study that goes beyond a scientific article. However, given the space limitations of an article, our analysis will not be excessively exhaustive. Starting from Amossy (2017) and then Paveau and Costa (to be published), we selected only a few excerpts in which the public debate was more heated and pointed to conflicting issues, which circulate in the interdiscourse and that are resumed in the linguistic materiality of the analyzed speeches. We are also interested in observing the extent to which these resumptions turn into resistance processes.

This is not a speculative exercise, but a study that seeks to understand a sociodiscursive phenomenon very present in our current society, both in its materiality and complexity. In other words, it is not just a question of analyzing this controversy to better understand what it touches on. What matters “is not the social problem addressed by the controversy, [that is, its very content] but the global phenomenon it raises” (AMOSSY, 2017, p. 09). Moreover, we believe that the other side of the controversy must be addressed, that is, the subjects who felt attacked by it. This is an aspect still little touched on by Amossy, whose main concern is the argumentative functioning of the controversy, but which is the subject of recent reflections by Marie-Anne Paveau and Costa (to be published), in their proposal of a discursive theory of re-signification:

One point these two works have in common [on controversy on the web] is the enunciative perspective (the production of online violence and the analysis of the speeches produced) that generally

does not mention the possibilities of response provided by web devices. Internet protection guides for adolescents never indicate, for example, the possibility of a qualified and reparative response in the list of possible reactions to cyber-harassment. (PAVEAU; COSTA, to be published, p. 25)

Paveau and Costa (to be published) discuss the need for us to reflect discursively on the responses to controversies, especially those that insult certain subjects.

2 Controversy as conflict management: some considerations

Before presenting and analyzing the collected data, we must stress that although the controversy surrounding Paulo Guedes' speech was developed in social networks through digital conversations, it is not exclusively related to this context. Although this controversy involves a political, economic and cultural context outside the internet, but its development was in such environment in a seemingly unruly way, where outrageous language is employed to hurt and insult the opponent. As we will see in this article, online discussions are usually aggressive and hostile interactions.

On this issue, Amossy (2017) notes that internet users wear a mask in digital conversations, a kind of pseudonym or avatar that allows them to use of verbal violence and attack others without any consequences. According to the author, it is amid this game of masks that a certain depersonalization occurs, and, therefore, a de-responsibility in both the legal social spheres and in ethics. In this case,

the controversial debate no longer opposes social actors, but "avatars", beings endowed with a fictitious identity in cyberspace. In the carnivalization of political speech – which starts the game of masks – the internet user would grant himself all rights, to the point that the worst excesses are feared (AMOSSY, 2017, p. 174).

According to the French scholar, far from being mere individual bursts of mood, hostile online interactions are actually related to psychosocial conflicts. Even in their brutality, these interactions participate in a ritual that models agonistic relationships at the foundation of the controversy. It means that verbal violence does not empty the argument. On the contrary,

it is the coexistence of argumentation and violence that allows violent virtual discussions not to fall into pure aggressiveness and to remain in the contextual frame of the controversy as an argumentative modality characterized by the clash of antagonistic opinions. They do not constitute unbridled verbal behavior that allows all inhibitions to go away, but a mode of conflict management in which the media device grants a place to verbal violence, a place that cannot be denied (AMOSSY, 2017, p. 178).

Thus, according to Amossy (2017), as contradictory as it may seem given the markedly passionate tone, a controversial interaction is always very well argued. Therefore, the question of its belonging to argumentation has been reversed: it is no longer a question of whether controversy should be placed outside the domain of argumentation, but to ask to what extent it is distinguished from deliberation. For the author, this question is answered as it adopts a modular conception of argumentation, defining it as a *continuum* that goes from the construction of responses to the shock between antagonistic theses. It refers to global interaction structures qualified as argumentative modalities. Controversy as a strongly agonistic interaction that permeates the genres (a speech in the Chamber of Deputies, an opinion article...) and the types of speeches (journalistic, political...) is an argumentative modality situated in one of the *continuum's* poles, to the extreme limit of its possibilities. We thus have an argumentative manifestation in the form of a brutal clash, with contradictory opinions circulating in the public space. If there is a clash between contradictory opinions, it is because the opposition of the speeches – in the controversy – is the object of a clear dichotomization in which two antithetical positions exclude one another, far reaching a consensus. While a well-argued debate supposes directing participants towards a solution, dichotomization “radicalizes the debate, making it difficult – often impossible – to solve” (DASCAL, 2008 *apud* AMOSSY 2017, p. 50).

In summary, the controversy that deals with issues of public interest – such as the one analyzed here – is a verbal management of conflict, characterized by a tendency of dichotomization that, in turn, makes the search for an agreement difficult. Controversy takes shape in a democratic environment that both authorizes and regulates it. Controversy cannot arise or develop outside this environment. The management of these tensions is delicate and can vary from one genre of speech to

another, and from one controversy to the other. This raises the question of the breaks in contracts, imbalances and excesses, the nature and consequences that must be examined *in loco*. At the same time, we must emphasize that not every conflicting situation generates a controversial intervention, but it is a fact that all controversy is the result of conflict. “Conflict is not only within the controversy: it lies outside of controversy and constitutes its source” (AMOSSY, 2017, p. 53).

As we have seen, Amossy’s (2017) work involves shaping conflict to account for the argumentative functioning of controversy. However, anchored in Paveau and Costa (to be published), we understand that it is necessary to go beyond the dichotomy “Proponent” *versus* “Opponent” and think, above all, that the subjects affected by a controversy do not always react passively to the offenses directed to them – e.g., verbal violence. The reactions can be the most varied: from a simple denial of the offense – by stating its non-pertinence – to the engendering of all work made by the insulted subject, starting from the insult and subverting it to the very insulting subject.

Based on the analysis of data circulating on the web 2.0, especially in the so-called participatory social web, Paveau and Costa (to be published), from an analysis of digital discourse, propose a theory that seeks to account precisely of the movement made by the subject who is offended and subverts the insult to their favor and/or towards the subject who insults. Re-signification is proposed to think about the argument that erects a counter discourse from an offensive utterance and, thus, regenerates itself and rehabilitates its power of action (BUTLER, 1990). Their theory is a theory of discursive re-signification. This theory is grounded on a set of techno-discursive practices that circulate on the web, especially in the so-called participatory social web.

Paveau and Costa (to be published) present a typology of these techno-discursive practices based on three categories: enunciative re-contextualization – the insulting speech is resumed by taking its place with a re-signification; analog publication – the insulting utterance is resumed, engendering in its place a re-signification that begins to circulate in different contexts from which it initially circulated in; the production of a cultural device – the insulting utterance is resumed and replaced by a re-signification that begins to circulate in different contexts from where it circulated initially, and this re-signification becomes a cultural and intellectual device of resistance. The authors thus propose a

theorization of re-signification in order to transform it into an operative notion for discourse analysis, in the wake of Butler, of Brontsema's work, previous studies on this concept and also integrating Kunert's perspective. This theorization exceeds the very practice of re-appropriation of designations of people and moves away from the lexical or categorial approaches often used to exemplify re-signification. Re-signification is thus open to other discursive practices and tactics allowed by the digital discursive universes – but not only by them –, involving not only the designators, but the discourses, signs, images and sounds. Re-signification is, therefore, not only a semantic-pragmatic process, but a total discursive device that involves varied and multi-semiotic discursive forms [of which offended subjects use to respond to their offenders] (PAVEAU; COSTA, to be published, p. 30)

The re-signification by enunciative re-contextualization is understood by Paveau and Costa (to be published, p. 36) as the most common re-signification practice:

From a linguistic point of view, it is the repetition of words, speeches or signs in the form of origin, in different contexts from a different enunciative source, because it is related to the person who was offended. Discursive circulation is what produces re-signification (PAVEAU; COSTA, to be published, p. 30).

They also observe that re-contextualization takes place from the dominant semiotic code (written, oral, imagery and sound). The authors thus designate the pluri-semiotic productions in which writing is the main code as the scriptural dominant. They thus raise three possibilities: simple reposting; reposting as a re-significant comment; and the enunciative resumption.

Regarding the dominant iconic form, Paveau and Costa (to be published) present a possibility: the publication of selfies, photographs including the offended and the offending party. Regarding pluri-semiotic forms in dominant oral form, they propose two possibilities: the reading aloud of offensive comments and the singing of offensive comments. On analog publications (understood as “the network of a techno-discursive production analogous to that of “attack”), suggest two possibilities: the analog publication of still images and the analog publication of moving images (video). Finally, the authors understand

re-signification as the production of a cultural or intellectual device as a set of re-significant responses related to the construction of cultural or intellectual techno-discursive devices: “the offended subjects produce re-significant statements from their technical competences, which are related to their professional field, media and humanities.” The authors see three possibilities for this type of re-signification: media creation; the iconic-discursive-financial device; and the production of scientific knowledge.

To analyze re-signification in digital contexts based on the three proposed typologies, the French researchers also present seven linguistic-(techno)discursive criteria, which, according to them, constitute re-signification as a discursive process:

1. pragmatic criterion: the insult causes a speech wound, stigmatization, attack, etc., regarding the identity of a person or group;
2. interactional criterion: a response to the offensive speech is produced;
3. enunciative criterion: the offended subject is the enunciative source of the response, which he resumes from the offensive speech on his own as self-categorization, or he provokes a simple re-contextualization;
4. semantic-axiological criterion: the speech-response comprises an inversion or semantic and/or axiological change;
5. discursive criterion: the speech-response is produced in a different context from the one where it was an offense, thus being re-contextualized by “openness to unknown contexts” (BUTLER, 2004, p. 234);
6. socio-semantic criterion: the re-contextualized use of the language element is judged as acceptable and recognized as such by the subjects involved, who form a collective subject;
7. pragmatic-political criterion: the re-signified statement is revolutionary since it produces both reparation and resistance, expanding the cohesion of the militant subject (KUNERT, 2010). (PAVEAU; COSTA, to be published, p. 39)

Based on these criteria, the authors define re-signification as a practice involving speech, linguistic material response practice (2)¹ to an offensive speech (1), made by the attacked subject by simple self-categorization or re-contextualization (3), which establishes a return of the offensive speech (4) in an alternative context (5), while the new use is collectively accepted (6) and produces an act of reparation and resistance (7).

The criteria listed by Paveau and Costa (to be published) will also be used in data analysis; data that circulated in different media (magazines; newspapers; interviews; radio and television programs; blogs, Twitter, etc.) and are quite representative of what Amossy (2017) designates as controversial interaction, that is, a set of antagonistic discourses that denounce, protest, call to action and, more generally, , maintain – as dissensus – communication in public space between individuals whose views are different and exclusionary. It is a controversial interaction since it is presented, on the one hand, as a direct reaction in the form of rebuttal to the minister’s speech and, on the other, in line with it.

3 On Paulo Guedes’ statement and its media repercussion: a controversy in debate

With the exchange rate for the US dollar reaching R\$ 4.35, its highest nominal value until that moment since the creation of the Real plan, the high unemployment rate and GDP growth below expectations, the Brazilian economy has been showing signs of² a strong recession. However, the Minister of Economy Paulo Guedes, declared during the 2020 Seminar for the Opening of Legislative House on February 12 that a higher exchange rate is “good for everyone.” Guedes illustrated his reasoning by saying that with the dollar at a lower rate, even the “maid” was traveling to Disney in the United States. In the words of the minister,

¹ Speech because it touches on the use of words, linguistic because there is a meta-discursive dimension, material because re-signification must be published in a media, from the most current to the oldest, to be shareable.

² Brazil still has 12.5 million people unoccupied, according to data released by IBGE in February 2020.

There is no such a thing as exchange at R\$ 1.80. We are going to export less, substitute imports, tourism, everybody is going to Disneyland, the maid is going to Disneyland, a free-for-all. Now wait just a minute. Wait a minute, wait a minute. Go for a trip in Foz do Iguaçu, in the Northeast, it is packed with beautiful beaches. Go to Cachoeiro do Itapemirim, go visit the place where Roberto Carlos was born, get to know Brazil, make trips around the country. Do you understand? There's plenty of beautiful stuff to see. (GUEDES, 2020, *apud* SOUZA; MATOSO, 2020).

Guedes sought to clarify his statement:

Before they say, the minister is saying that maids are going to Disneyland. No. The minister is saying that the exchange rate was so low that everyone was going to Disneyland, even the lower classes. Everyone has to go to Disneyland and get to know it someday, but not 3, 4 times a year. Because with the dollar at R\$ 1.80, there were people going 4 times a year. Go 3 times to Foz do Iguaçu, Chapada Diamantina, get to know a little bit of Brazil, go see the Amazon jungle. And then, on the 4th time, you go to Disneyland instead of going 4 times a year. (GUEDES, 2020 *apud* SOUZA; MATOSO, 2020).

Guedes' statement resonated in the media immediately, becoming the subject of intense controversy. In other words, his statement was resumed and commented by personalities from various political and social classes, especially by maids, who were offended by the minister's prejudiced words. For example, the National Federation of Domestic Workers (Fenatrad – Federação Nacional dos Trabalhadores Domésticos), represented by the current Secretary General, Creusa Maria Oliveira, compared the Minister's speech with that of a "slave owner" (*senhor de engenho*, in Portuguese). For her, Guedes' statements revealed a "prejudiced and discriminatory view of the working class." Oliveira added that she was not surprised, since she understands that the current government administration works in "driving the economy focused on the precarization of labor":

I was not surprised by his statements because they reveal the prejudiced and discriminatory outlook with which the government sees and treats not only domestic workers, but also those who work for the government. It is a total lack of respect for the working

class, for black people, for indigenous peoples. (OLIVEIRA, 2020 *apud* MÍDIA4P, 2020).

In line with Oliveira (2020), Janaína Mariano de Souza, president of the Union of Maids and Domestic Workers, in an interview with *Rádio Brasil Atual* journalists Marilu Cabañas and Glauco Faria (2020), stated that: “We really hope that the minister will apologize, because our line of work goes through so much discrimination and now we have this.”

Luis Arthur Nogueira, columnist for the magazine *Istoedinheiro*, pondered:

the minister could have stated his opinion on the exchange rate without letting a terrible prejudice slip. He may even say he did not mean it that way, but the reasoning behind his statement was: maids are poor people and poor people cannot have the money to go to Disney. If even they were able to travel, it is because the exchange rate was completely wrong. He even suggested that the trips be made inside Brazil. (NOGUEIRA, 2020).

Adding more fuel to the controversy, we have a statement given by Deborah Duprat to the newspaper *UOL*, Second Deputy Attorney General of the Republic, who is in charge of the Federal Attorney’s Office for Citizen Rights (PFDC) of the Federal Prosecutor’s Office:

It is very serious for a minister of State to claim that government workers are parasites as a category and that maids are traveling too much to Disneyland. However, this is not restricted to his statements. Paulo Guedes is proposing, in fact, that this happens. That is, that these so-called ‘parasites’ no longer exist and that the maids can never travel. (DUPRAT, 2020, *apud* SAKAMOTO, 2020).

Several internet users also accused the minister of prejudice and of governing only for the more affluent classes. They also complained about the lack of respect for the poorer segments of the population. The former president of the Republic, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, was among those who criticized Guedes on social networks. According to him, “the minister is part of a group of people who do not support either the social rise of the poorest, nor the sovereign development of Brazil.” In the same line of Lula, some allies of the former president also gave statements,

including as parliamentarians Erika Kokay (DF), Paulo Pimenta (RS) and Alexandre Padilha (SP).

From the Congress, the Deputy of PSOL elected by the state of Rio de Janeiro, Marcelo Freixo, recorded a video on the night of Wednesday, 12, in which he called Guedes a “parasite”. The minister’s speech represents, according to Freixo, the “thoughts of a slave owner, an elitist and a coward.” On Thursday morning, February 13, he also tweeted: “Paulo Guedes is in a fierce dispute with Weintraub for the title of most disgusting minister of this government of parasites.” Deputy Tabata Amaral (PDT-SP) agreed with Freixo by stating that “Guedes’ speech reveals his prejudice, racism and his vision of slave owner.”

Among the members of the government, the only one who supported the Minister of Economy was the Minister of the Environment, Ricardo Salles:

My affection, admiration, respect and unconditional support to my friend and Minister Paulo Guedes. The best economy minister in the world. He is a serious and spontaneous person who, by his purity of character, is yet to understand that everything he says will be distorted and maliciously manipulated. (SALLES, 2020, *apud* BITENCURT, 2020).

For Onyx Lorenzoni, Minister of Citizenship, Paulo Guedes was “unfortunate”:

I believe that the phrase was unfortunate. I would love to be able to say the opposite, I’m glad that all people in Brazil, regardless of their work career, can have such a good income that allows them to go wherever they want. We have to understand that happiness, each one has its own, (each one) has its own fun. (LORENZONI, 2020, *apud* MACEDO, 2020).

Jair Bolsonaro, president of Brazil, tried to exempt himself from any responsibility for Guedes’ statement. “Ask the person who said that, I answer for my deeds.” (BOLSONARO, 2020, in an interview with MAIA, 2020). The repercussion was such that the terms *dollar*, *maid* and *Disney* were among the most commented on social networks, which made the name of the Minister of Economy lead Twitter’s trending topics on the morning of Thursday, February 13. Faced with the strong repercussion,

Guedes, during an event launching a new line of real estate credit with fixed interest rate financed by Caixa Econômica, cited housemaids by stating that the new type of credit would benefit the poorer families: “It is precisely also the humblest families, housemaids, to whom I apologize to, if I may have offended them. My father’s mother was a maid.” (GUEDES, 2020, apud MAZUI, 2020). He then claimed that his statement about housemaids traveling to Disney was a reflection of a pricing policy that was “pushing the population in the wrong direction” and stressed that the statement was taken out of context. However, after apologizing, the minister questioned what the problem of referencing housemaids was.

Guedes’ new statement did not put an end to the controversy, on the contrary, it caused a flood of new comments made in the media over the next few days. We will not resume them here because we believe that the examples given already meet the proposed objective. That is, they show that the dichotomized confrontation of antagonistic theses, the polarization that it triggers and the disqualification of the adversary presuppose subjects deeply involved in the debate. In fact, it is almost impossible to participate in a heated debate without engaging personally. In other words, the speaker inscribes subjectivity in the speech and strongly takes a position when stating, denying, questioning, making an exclamation, etc.

This is what makes the controversy a type of argument and not a simple aggressive discourse. Despite the manifestation of “virulent” speeches (“prejudiced minister,” “disgusting,” “racist,” “slave owner”), especially those by left-wing social movement protesters and parties in response to the minister, what underlies the controversy is conflict and not violence. It means that “for the controversy, verbal violence is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition” (AMOSSY, 2017, p. 167). Even when violence accompanies controversy – as in the cases above –, it does so in an auxiliary role rather than as a defining trait. Violence is a discursive record and not an argumentative modality. Its function is to manifest and intensify the dichotomization, polarization and discredit that provide the basis for the controversy. Violence in itself does not produce a rude and uncontrollable speech because it is functional and regulated. However, it helps the controversy to perform different functions, such as protest or incitement to action. In such cases, the debaters establish not only a division between adversaries, but a “we” in front of a “them”, creating enemy fields. In other words, internet users gather in front of a computer

screen in a trial whose virulent language is not only an escape. Violence leads them in a single impetus to express a collective rejection capable of silencing behaviors deemed intolerable, such as that of the Minister of Economy in relation to the poorer classes.

As well seen from the data analyzed considering Amossy (2017), controversy in itself is not uncontrollable; it is managed, that is, the conflict created is administered. However, we must consider that the controversy, in addition to placing the subjects in antagonistic places (“us” versus “them”), there is always the possibility of these subjects feeling attacked and developing strategies of subversion of insults, whether in their favor and/or towards the insulting party. From the use of different techno-discursive practices that, as we have seen, can be understood from three categories, ranging from the simplest to the most complex: enunciative re-contextualization; analog publication and the production of a cultural device as suggested by Paveau and Costa (to be published). We will now use the postulates of Paveau and Costa (to be published) to analyze the manifestations of the subjects assaulted by the prejudiced comment made by minister Paulo Guedes.



Marinalva de Souza, diarista em São Paulo
Imagem: Arquivo pessoal

Domésticas sobre
Guedes: "Se a gente
tiver condições,
pode ir aonde
quiser"

Source: <https://economia.uol.com.br/noticias/redacao/2020/02/13/paulo-guedes-empregadas-domesticas-viagem.htm>

In Image 1, which can be understood as a simple enunciative re-contextualization when considering Paveau and Costa (to be published), we have Antônia da Silva from Maceió, a housemaid who re-signifies Guedes' statement by saying: "If we have the means, we go wherever we want to." This is a re-signifying speech that seeks to reverse Guedes' insult, drawing attention to the individual freedom of subjects, who, based on their own resources, can go wherever they wish.

In this image,³ we see five of the seven criteria proposed by Paveau and Costa (to be published):

1. pragmatic criterion: there is a speech wound caused by the insult about the identity of a group – Paulo Guedes' comment about maids – "it is good that the dollar is high, because with low rate (...) even maids were going to Disney, a free-for-all";
2. interactional criterion: a response to the offensive statement is produced – the speech made by Antônia da Silva – "If we have the means, we go wherever we want to";
3. enunciative criterion: the assaulted subject is the enunciative origin of the answer, which is resumed from the offensive utterance, causing a simple re-contextualization – the professional does not touch on the offense itself;
4. semantic-axiological criterion: the speech-response comprises an inversion or semantic and/or axiological change – the speech produced by the professional shifts the question to the individual freedom of people;
5. discursive criterion: the speech-response is produced in a context different from the offensive speech, thus being re-contextualized by "being open to unknown contexts" – the speech produced by the professional begins to circulate in other techno-discursive devices, for example, on the economics section of a news website.

³ We could also discuss here the way UOL, through the article's title, designated those involved in the controversy: on one side we have Guedes, the minister, and on the other, Housemaids, Marinalva de Souza and Antônia da Silva. However, these two names appear only in the article's body, unlike that of the minister. This issue, although pertinent, would stray from the main objective of our work.

The BBC Brasil website, on February 13, the day after the controversial statement, published an⁴ article criticizing the prejudiced comment by Paulo Guedes (IMAGE 2). The article was organized from tweets (IMAGE 3) made by maids and their relatives, and shows the discursive functioning of the re-signification proposed by Paveau et al. (2020).

IMAGE 2 – Article published on the BBC Brasil website.

'Em que Brasil você vive?': empregadas domésticas e parentes que nunca saíram do Brasil reagem a fala de Guedes

13 fevereiro 2020

f     Compartilhar



"tinha até empregada doméstica indo pra disney"
senhor paulo guedes??? minha mãe, empregada doméstica, trabalhava a semana inteira na casa de várias senhoras, ainda era manicure e confeitadeira, mas nunca conseguiu nem sair da cidade pra visitar os pais!!! EM QUE BRASIL VC VIVE???

Source: www.bbc.com/portugues

⁴ This article can be accessed at <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/salasocial-51476202>

IMAGE 3 – Twitter Post



Source: Twitter web app

In this case, it is re-signification from an analog publication. Organized based on a hyper-genre⁵ (journalistic article + comments posted on twitter – as screenshots) this publication questions Guedes’s statement using a question in all caps that intensifies the outrage – “IN WHAT COUNTRY DO U LIVE IN???” – and the statement that even though her mother has worked as a maid for 40 years, she has never been to Disney. Unlike the previous article that questioned the freedom of the subjects to travel, this one sought to highlight the total disconnect from reality in the minister’s statement.

Here we observed seven criteria:

⁵ According to Maingueneau (2015, p. 130) “a hyper-genre is not a genre of discourse, but a [textual] formatting with weak restrictions that can cover very different genres. Some hyper-genres such as dialogue, newspapers, or letters, are, above all, modes of formal presentation of organization of discourses: [depending on the effects targeted] they loosely restrict enunciation. Others like reports or interviews are more restrictive.”

1. pragmatic criterion: there is a speech wound caused by the insult about the identity of a group – Paulo Guedes’ prejudiced comment about maids - “it is good that the dollar is high, because with low rate (...) even maids were going to Disney, a free-for-all”;
2. interactional criterion: a response to the offensive speech is produced – a journalistic story organized from the tweets of the relatives of maids, who incorporated for themselves the minister’s insult – “IN WHAT COUNTRY DO U LIVE IN???” and the statement that, even though her mother had worked as a maid for 40 years, she never went to Disney;
3. enunciative criterion: the assaulted subject is no longer the enunciative origin of the answer, but rather their relatives who resume the offensive speech on their own account, incorporating for themselves and causing a re-contextualization; this re-contextualization is resumed by the news website and transformed into analog;
4. semantic-axiological criterion: the statement-response comprises an inversion or semantic and/or axiological change – the speech produced by the maids’ relatives produces an inversion of meanings, and this inversion begins to circulate on the website opposing the minister’s offense;
5. discursive criterion: the statement-response is produced in a context different from the offensive speech, which is re-contextualized initially by the maids’ relatives and then by the news site implying the “opening to unknown contexts” – the speech produced by the relatives of the employees is appropriated by the website and begins to circulate in other techno-discursive devices, for example, on a news site.
6. socio-semantic criterion: the re-contextualized use of the language element is deemed acceptable and recognized as such by the subjects involved, who form a collective subject: maids, relatives and the media, each incorporates the insult and returns it to the offending party in their own way, showing Guedes his total ignorance of the Brazilian reality;

7. pragmatic-political criterion: the re-signified statement is, in a way, revolutionary since it produces both reparation and resistance, expanding the cohesion of the militant subject.

In addition to the minister having to make a public apology,⁶ his speech caused several manifestations from civil society in defense of housemaids,⁷ such as the content of Image 4.

IMAGE 4 – Article published on

Psicanalista explica por que Paulo Guedes fala mal dos pobres

Coordenador do Laboratório de Psicanálise da Universidade de São Paulo explica por que Paulo Guedes fala mal dos pobres publicamente



Ministro da Economia, Paulo Guedes Foto: PR/Isac Nóbrega

Source: <https://www.pragmatismopolitico.com.br/2020/02/paulo-guedes-domesticas-pobres.html>

⁶ See, for example, the article published on 02/20 in <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/02/20/em-discurso-paulo-guedes-pede-desculpas-as-empregadas-domesticas.ghtml>

⁷ See, for example, the beautiful article by Preta Rara, artist, rapper, historian, black and woman, published in GELEDÉS – Instituto da Mulher Negra: https://www.geledes.org.br/ministro-paulo-guedes-fui-empregada-domestica-e-preciso-te-dizer-uma-coisa/?gclid=CjwKCAjw1cX0BRBmEiwAy9tKHnG_swilkkAHA9Vy9iz9tVEXzgiDyyrOq6-xmIdu7j12WINZZ-ShEhoC0vgQAvD_BwE

The article was published on the website *Pragmatismo Político* on February 14, 2020, and shows that Paulo Guedes' prejudiced speech about housemaids also became the focus of the work and research of specialists, acquiring the character of an intellectual device. In this article, the psychoanalyst Christian Dunker, Full Professor of the Department of Clinical Psychology of the Institute of Psychology of the University of São Paulo – USP, argues that it is possible to observe a discursive regularity in Guedes' statements, namely: the target of the prejudice are always the poor.

After exposing his theses, he [Guedes] must say something to “win” the interlocutor and ends up dropping these ideas. With Lula, it was the metaphors with football, which made an idea that had already been understood cognitively, be understood relationally. It is the “did you understand or do you want me to explain it better?” moment. It is the eruption of the metaphorical level, since the pact of communication requires, from time to time, a phatic expression.

This moment shows more clearly with whom the interlocutor is talking, who is the recipient and target audience, with who they seek to sign the “contract”. He says inappropriate things, but they are directed at a particular sector of the economic elite, a group that understands the sub-narrative that assigns a place to the rich and the poor the same way he does. Thus making it clear through his statement that they need to ally themselves against the poor who are using too many public services, taking too many flights, going to places where they should not go.

(...) Because for him, the source of the country's problems is that there are people out of place. It is metaphorical. Imagine if they all started doing that, what would happen? He is not thinking as an economist, because if this really happened, it would boost the economy. We would have yet another category spending more money inside and outside the country, ensuring more flow and keeping the economy warm. But he is satisfied with the reduced circulation. He believes that democracy and progress is something for the few.

(...) If we take what Guedes is saying and put it in the mouth of some low-grade economist, they would be satirized and considered by everyone as someone anachronistic. But in this type of discourse aimed at this audience, this narrative works. Because it is continuously producing enemies that do not want Brazil to grow. It is part of a paranoid speech.

Previous excerpts from the speech of the specialist in psychoanalysis show that re-signification also takes place in scientific and/or scientific dissemination environments, producing an intellectual techno-discursive device. In other words, in addition to the offense being reverted to the offender by the offending subject, other subjects may re-signify this offense, taking it as an object of study and evidencing, for example, that the offenses to poor people are a regular occurrence in Minister Paulo Guedes' interventions. This is a perfect example of a researcher – a psychoanalyst – using psychoanalytic methods to produce a re-significant response – an intellectual device – to the insults that the maids received from Paulo Guedes.

It is not simply a question of creating controversy with the minister because of his prejudiced comment, but of showing, as we have said, that this comment is part of a regular insulting discourse imposed on the poorer populations that accompanies the minister in his public interventions ever since he took office at the beginning of Jair Bolsonaro's government in 2018. The semantic and axiological questions in an article like the one by the psychoanalyst matter less than the epistemological ones, that is, it is a question of showing in the light of one of the humanities – in this case, psychoanalysis – that Guedes' prejudiced comment is consistent with the type of discourse engendered by Bolsonaro.⁸

4 Some considerations

As demonstrated over the course of this article, the prejudiced statement made by Minister Paulo Guedes caused an eruption of controversial discourses and resistance movements in Brazilian media and

⁸ See for example the article published in *Revista Exame* on 02/14/2020 <https://exame.abril.com.br/economia/parasita-ai-5-e-domesticas-na-disney-as-falas-mais-polemicas-de-guedes/>

social networks. The debate, therefore, raises a social problem concerning both an economic policy and the poorer classes. Those involved in the debate take a side, argue and act in resistance, taking into account their longings and convictions. Many of them are guided by historical and social issues, such as:

- 1) Is it legitimate for a Minister of Economy to state something like “In Brazil, with the dollar exchange rate rising, do the poorer classes have the money to travel?”
- 2) What is wrong with housemaids going to Disney? Is it a problem in preferring to travel abroad than travelling in Brazil? Is making dreams come true the privilege of a single social class?
- 3) With the economy in crisis, the poorest population would have a hard time going to Disney, even if the dollar rate was R\$ 1.80. If, in the past, maids went to Disney, is there any research to prove it? If so, would not it be because the economic situation in the country was better? Probably, so maids had more money in their pockets. Does the exchange rate alone work miracles?
- 4) It is an illusion to think that domestic tourism is a cheap alternative. It is very expensive to travel to Northeastern Brazil or to Foz do Iguaçu, as suggested by the minister. In fact, what does the government intend to do to really encourage domestic tourism?
- 5) If Minister Guedes’ economic agenda works, and Brazil goes back to growing 3% a year, will there be more jobs and income? Economic success, if it occurs, will tend to value the exchange rate a little (cheapen the dollar), and the logical consequence will be an increase in the number of Brazilians traveling abroad. This should be a source of pride and commemoration on the part of a minister of the economy, as it would be proof that their economic policy would be working.
- 6) Are there more intelligent and elegant ways for the minister to explain his defense of a devalued exchange rate (expensive dollar) as something positive for the country? The prejudice rooted in his speech got even worse precisely because it came from someone who worked and lived many years abroad – and who has probably been to Disney, New York, Paris...

These questions show the importance of going beyond the study of the argumentative functioning of the controversy – regardless of how pertinent this study is and, it is. We also must understand how the subjects who are affected directly or not by the controversy react and resist. Since these issues are part of the constitutive interdiscursivity of the statement under review and resumed by the debaters – directly or not involved in the debate –, understanding their effects also requires us to consider that discourse is not right at first. Or, as Pêcheux says,

the discursive process does not have, as a right, beginning: discourse always works over a previous discourse, to which it attributes the role of raw material, and the speaker knows that, when a given event is evoked – which was once the object of discourse –, it resuscitates in the spirit of listeners the discourse in which such occurrence was claimed, with the deformations that the current situation introduces and from which a side can be taken. (PÊCHEUX, 1997, p. 77.)

It means to say that Guedes' statement is immersed in a network of relationships, comments, allusions, re-significations, in other words, in a heterogeneous series of speeches, functioning in different discursive records. It is because there is this interdiscursive relationship that it is susceptible to multiple interpretations. Also, because of that, it is the subject of numerous comments, discursive resummptions, re-significations in the form of resistance in the media. In other words, the Minister of Economy speech presents the marks of the discourse of the "other", which bring back the interdiscourse in the realm of memory (COURTINE, 2009). In other words, his speech is built upon "already said" discourses, which provide the basis for and instigates the controversy: from an economic point of view, the cheap dollar stimulates travel and spending abroad, but hinders Brazilian exports. Therefore, in the minister's view, the current exchange rate, above R\$ 4.00, is better for the Country than the rate below R\$ 2.00 in the past.

This memory, in turn, tends to conjure the chance of discourse by reiterating the identical, its eternal return (FOUCAULT, 2006). It privileges the discursive forms of repetition (citation, recitation, commentary) and the linguistic mechanisms of connection, fitting and detachment, responsible, to a large extent, for their constant discursive resummptions. Thus, the controversy exposes not only the event to which

it refers, but it traces positions, delimits trajectories of meanings, models communication and above all, urges the offended subjects to resist. It is about mobilizing discourses that (re)organize reality, that is, the interpretations of the “real”, produced by enunciator(s) inserted in a given or multiple discursive/ideological formation(s). In other words, the controversy raised does not merely translate the two sides of a debate, but is mainly based on the resistance “in the power from which we want to take over” (FOUCAULT, 1986).

Authorship statement

This text, which seeks to contribute towards our society being decent – a society is decent if the functioning of its institutions does not provide reasons for its members to feel humiliated [and be killed] (MARGALIT, 2007) – is the dialogical result of a four-handed work, so it is difficult to discern what was produced by the first author and what was written by the second author. This is a set of voices that polyphonically produce a harmonic choir. However, we clarify that the discussions made from the theoretical-methodological framework proposed by Amossy (2017) were under the responsibility of the first author and that the discussions based on Paveau and Costa (to be published) were under the responsibility of the second author.

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