

ANTIFEMINIST RHETORIC AND PRACTICE IN BRAZIL

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Abstract: Antifeminism has grown on the twenty-one century, being used and reproduced by governments around the world to acquire loyal subjects and implement other conservative policies in their countries. This paper analysis the anti-feminist rhetoric and practice in one of the cases, Brazil, focusing on Bolsonaro's government. Other studies have studied this topic, but we are still lacking an approach that considers psychoanalysis and the fantasmatic effect on our social and political scenario. Using discourse theory and rhetoric, this paper answers the questions: What is the character of Bolsonaro's government's anti-feminist rhetoric and practice? What accounts for its grip among members of his base? The answers are related to how the government convinces their subjects through their character, reason and emotion. Related to the latter, the grip happens through theft of enjoyment and the anxiety brought by the threat of abortion and gender ideology.

Keywords: Discourse analysis; Antifeminism; Psychoanalysis; Rhetoric.

PRÁTICA E RETÓRICA ANTIFEMINISTA NO BRASIL

Resumo: O antifeminismo cresceu no século XXI, sendo utilizado e reproduzido por governos de todo o mundo para adquirir súbditos leais e implementar outras políticas conservadoras nos seus países. Este artigo analisa a retórica e prática antifeminista em um dos casos, o Brasil, centrando-se no governo Bolsonaro. Outros estudos estudaram este tema, mas ainda nos falta uma abordagem que considere a psicanálise e o efeito fantasmático no nosso cenário social e político. Utilizando a teoria do discurso e a retórica, este trabalho responde às questões: Qual é o caráter da retórica e da prática antifeminista do governo Bolsonaro? O que explica o seu domínio entre os membros da sua base? As respostas estão relacionadas com a forma como o governo convence os seus apoiadores através do seu caráter, razão e emoção. Relacionado com esta última, o suporte acontece através do roubo do prazer e da ansiedade trazida pela ameaça do aborto e da ideologia do gênero.

Palavras-chave: Análise de discurso; Antifeminismo; Psicanálise; Retórica.

PRÁCTICA Y RETÓRICA ANTIFEMINISTA EN BRASIL

Resumen: El antifeminismo ha crecido en el siglo XXI, siendo utilizado y reproducido por gobiernos de todo el mundo para adquirir súbditos leales e implementar otras políticas conservadoras en sus países. Este trabajo analiza la retórica y la práctica antifeminista en uno de los casos, Brasil, centrándose en el gobierno de Bolsonaro. Otros estudios han estudiado este tema, pero aún falta un enfoque que considere el psicoanálisis y el efecto fantasmático en nuestro escenario social y político. Utilizando la teoría del discurso y la retórica, este trabajo responde a las preguntas: ¿Cuál es el carácter de la retórica y la práctica

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antifeminista del gobierno de Bolsonaro? ¿Qué es lo que explica su arraigo entre los miembros de su base? Las respuestas están relacionadas con la forma en que el gobierno convence a sus súbditos a través de su carácter, la razón y la emoción. En relación con esto último, el soporte se produce a través del robo del disfrute y la ansiedad que trae la amenaza del aborto y la ideología de género.

Palabras clave: Análisis del discurso; Antifeminismo; Psicoanálisis; Retórica.

1 Introduction

In 2017, feminist theorist Judith Butler arrived in Brazil to speak about her work. She was met with a group of conservative activists on the airport, holding signs of her crossed face and screaming: “Judith Butler, you are not welcome in Brazil”; “Fuck yourself and go to hell”; “You guys are evil”; “You are a paedophile”; “Stupid assassin”; “Children murderer”; “Family destroyer”; “Leave, gender ideology”; and “You have no shame”.

The episode illustrated the rage against feminists common to a part of the Brazilian population and happened simultaneously with Jair Bolsonaro’s presidential campaign. As a populist president, Bolsonaro answered many demands in the Brazilian society, but four of them are especially important to comprehend his grip on his anti-feminist subjects: God, the traditional family, gender ideology and abortion. It is possible to notice the importance of each topic on his speeches and interviews, and on the rest of his ministry, especially on the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights. The anti-feminist view was present in previous governments, but with the new president the demands of the countermovement started being more aggressively addressed. The political project attempts to forge beliefs and make the countermovement’s project hegemonic. If the project succeeds, it can instigate violence and unbalanced rights to the population, such as misogyny and legal impediments to women’s and transgender’s rights. Some examples are abortion, education, professional opportunities and the recognition of the transgender as a person and citizen.

What is, then, the character of Bolsonaro’s government’s anti-feminist rhetoric and practice? Furthermore, what accounts for its grip among members of his base? To answer these questions, I will first make a literature review of anti-feminist rhetoric through time; then I will present my main hypothesis related to the relationship between the countermovement and the government. In sequence, I will explain my choices for the methodological approach, focusing on James Martin’s strategies to understand rhetoric in politics (through the books “Rhetoric and Politics” and “Psychopolitics”) and the Essex School of Discourse Theory. Finally, I will analyse Bolsonaro’s government approach to a

binary gendered society - which goes against the latest feminist waves - and the consequential rage against feminists of his subjects. It is essential to understand the workings of gender to see the problems posed to the term and combat false concepts that serve cultural universalism.¹

2 Historic Antifeminism Strategies and Rhetoric

Globally, the feminist movement was created by economic and structural forces, such as the role expansion of a high number of middle-class women, made possible by urbanization and industrialization. The women's movement has called for a variety of changes in society overtime: from political, educational and occupational restrictions to the overhaul of gender definition and sex stratification systems. While these changes expanded the roles of women, many continued to find fulfilling to be encapsulated in traditional family roles. In that sense. As Gray² argues women were the only group that organized collective actions against their own emancipation.

Dworkin³ argues that countermovements become true movements only after the emergence and success of the movement they oppose. Lipset and Raab⁴ said:

Desperately preservatives or restorative movements - that is backlash movements - require an aggressively moralistic stance and will find it somewhere. There needs to be invoked some system of good and evil which transcends the political or social process and freezes it.

I will now present some of those moments related to the antifeminist demand. The analysis chosen for this literature review are focused on qualitative research, in which most examine the rhetoric of the countermovement in specific case studies with a feminist approach.

The first changes focused on the separate spheres between men – on the public - and women – on the private. Marshall⁵ tells us that the anti-suffrage organization - the first antifeminist movement - began in 1872 in the USA. The author argues that the anti-suffragists produced the ideology of “ladies”: refined, modest, self-sacrificing, dignified and

¹ BUTLER, Judith. *Undoing gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

² CONOVER, Pamela Johnston; GRAY, Virginia. *Feminism and the New Right: conflict over the American Family*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983, n. 1, p. 217.

³ DWORKIN, Rosalind. *A Woman's Report: Numbers Are Not Enough*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1982, p. 375-400.

⁴ LIPSET, Seymour; RAAB, Earl. *The Politics of Unreason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 117.

⁵ MARSHALL, Susan E. Ladies against women: mobilization dilemmas of antifeminist movements. *Social Problems*, v. 32, n. 4, p. 348-362, 1985.

domestic women. This ideology was present in most of the countermovement's rhetoric and strategies, with constant symbols of motherhood, family and country. Women's suffrage would destroy the separate spheres, forcing the different sexes to compete and the eventual loss of female power and privilege. Feminism, then, was an attack on women's rights to a lifetime of financial support and was acting in men's interest.

This battle continued over the next century, with a new wave when the women's movement gained ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, in 1972. The ERA was an attempt to create a gender-free society, which was a direct attack to the ideology of separate spheres that antifeminists of the time - as the ones before - believed was the source of female power and identity. The ERA proponents were considered marital misfits, who wanted to revise the marriage contract, restructure society, remould the children to conform with their liberal values instead of God's, and replace the image of the woman of virtue and mother with the image of a prostitute and a lesbian⁶.

It is clear from the rhetoric strategies the relationship between the antifeminist movement and religion. Himmelstein⁷, on his quantitative cause-and-effect study, shows this correlation with the theory that what distinguishes the countermovement from feminists is the religious involvement: support for abortion declines with religious involvement, for example. He argues that whoever goes to church regularly also interacts more with other religious people, so they become part of a religious network that sustains a culture with political implications. The religious would interact constantly with traditional images of women and family, and they are the focus for the recruitment of antifeminists movements⁸. Religion provides the framework that validates moral absolutism, but this same framework is completely political: it is related to who will exercise power in the economy, state, family and churches⁹.

Today the antifeminist movement continues, mostly with very similar symbols and rhetoric. Since 2012, several European countries have seen the rise of conservative thought

⁶ SCHLAFLY, Phyllis. *The Power of the Positive Women*. New York: Crown Pub, 1977.

⁷ HIMMELSTEIN, Jerome. The social basis of antifeminism: Religious networks and culture. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, p. 1-15, 1986.

⁸ MATHEWS, D. *The threat of equality: The equal rights amendment and the myth of female solidarity*. Unpublished Manuscript, 1982. MCCARTHY, John D. *Social infrastructure deficits and new technologies: mobilizing unstructured sentiment pools*. 1982, Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Association. San Francisco.

⁹ PETCHESKY, Rosalind Pollack. Antiabortion, antifeminism, and the rise of the New Right. *Feminist Studies*, v.7, n. 2, p. 206-246, 1981.

and fundamentalist social movements against gender ideology¹⁰. The triggering factors vary between countries, but the simultaneity of the backlash shows that a transnational phenomenon is happening against the last feminist wave – specially gender ideology. Kuhar and Paternotte¹¹ argue:

It is crucial to bear in mind that “gender ideology” does not designate gender studies, but is a term initially created to oppose women’s and LGBT rights activism as well as the scholarship deconstructing essentialist and naturalistic assumptions about gender and sexuality.

The studies of antifeminism show us very important similarities between the countermovement worldwide, and the repetition of part of its rhetoric over the two waves. However, even if we understand some of the strategies, we still lack an explanation of how this ideology grips its subjects in a psychoanalytical level. The literature also states to study the rhetoric of the movement, but do not make clear what is the rhetoric strategy.

Aguiar and Pereira¹² argue that the antifeminism in Brazil today is very connected to the characteristics of the countermovement in the USA in 1980: a political environment with different views on violence, human rights and gender. The country has a specific scenario that allowed a right-wing populist government - Bolsonaro - to focus on the anxieties brought up by the feminist movement. In 2013 the country began manifesting against the economical politics and corruption. The president of the time, Dilma Rousseff, lost her strength as a politician and was impeached, at the same time the right-wing parties flourished and got more support, creating a big polarization in the Brazilian society. When the president left, a change in the ideological discourse of the country was seen, with more sexist jokes, objectification of the women’s body and offenses to gender.

In this context, antifeminist groups in Brazil appeared on social media. In 2018, the first Antifeminist Brazilian Congress happened, which claimed the incompatibility between feminism and Christianity, and its connection to communism. Feminist, in the Congress, were considered ugly and dirty. The *Época Magazine*¹³ said that there was a big male participation in the event, and that it was common to most of them to be using the t-shirt

¹⁰ KOVÁTS, Eszter. Questioning consensuses: right-wing populism, anti-populism, and the threat of ‘gender ideology’. *Sociological Research Online*, v.23, n. 2, p. 528-538, 2018.

¹¹ KUHAR, Roman.; PATERNOTTE, David. *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: mobilizing against equality*. Louisville: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, p. 5.

¹² DE AGUIAR, Bruno Soares.; PEREIRA, Matheus Ribeiro. O antifeminismo como backlash nos discursos do governo Bolsonaro. *Agenda Política*, v.7, n. 3, p. 8-35, 2019.

¹³ CALGANO, Victor. “Fecha as pernas”: o que pregam os participantes do 1 Congresso Antifeminista do Brasil. *Época Magazine*, 2018.

from the candidate for presidency Jair Bolsonaro. At the same time, a common discussion on the Congress was “gender ideology”.

Aguiar and Pereira¹⁴ analysed some of the discourses of Bolsonaro’s first year in the presidency. They argue that there is a clear backlash strategy on the government’s attitude, such as the inversion of causes by disconnecting social problems to patriarchal ideology and attributing the problems experienced by women to feminism; creation of myths that generate insecurity in the search for female independence; a set of negative characteristics attributed to feminist women, generating a fear of receiving such attributes; and, finally, to diminish the feminist movement as being something recent and fleeting, denying all the lived experiences so far.

Sabbatini¹⁵ analysed 32 groups on WhatsApp that had as main goal support Bolsonaro. As an important strategy and political marketing for his election, WhatsApp groups can show us how the most important themes are discussed between the subjects. The author argues that feminist women, on the eyes of the far right, are subjects to be interrupted. The fight to determine the meanings of some concepts related to feminism are contaminated by a rhetoric of threat and moral panic, which leads to discriminatory attitudes to maintain the status quo. To help this new narrative, fake news was an important part of the growth of antifeminism in the country. The analysed messages that had as object feminism were related to Christianity and false narratives related to the threat to family and children. The logical conclusion was the reason to vote for Jair Bolsonaro, since he would be the only one capable of fighting feminism. The goal would be to strengthen or relegitimize worldviews, values, institutions and belief systems based on moral, religious and authoritarian frameworks¹⁶.

The author ends her article arguing that the campaign has a populist rhetoric, that creates polarization in society. However, Sabbatini does not explicit what she means with populism in this scenario, and why this type of “populist rhetoric” could lead to polarization. It seems that from all the arguments in the article, the polarization comes from the backlash strategy, that can separate the society between those that agrees with the stereotypes and believe the fake news, and those that do not.

¹⁴ DE AGUIAR; PEREIRA, O antifeminismo como backlash nos discursos do governo Bolsonaro, *cit.*

¹⁵ SABBATINI, Leticia. “Feminista nem é gente”: uma análise sobre o antifeminismo em grupos bolsonaristas no WhatsApp. *44º Encontro Anual da ANPOCS*. 2020.

¹⁶ JUNQUEIRA, Rogerio Diniz. A invenção da “ideologia de gênero”: a emergência de um cenário político-discursivo e a elaboração de uma retórica reacionária antigênero. *Revista Psicologia Política*, v.18, n. 43, p. 449-502, 2018.

The studies of antifeminism in Brazil are scarce, which makes it lack different approaches to comprehend the phenomenon fully. The literature focuses on the rhetoric analysis based on a backlash strategy, but – as the international studies – do not answer how antifeminism grips its subjects and why this has become more evident in politics in 2018, since conservatism has always been a part of Brazilian politics. Finally, there are not analysis focusing on post structuralism and psychoanalysis – while rhetoric deals with what consciously people say and how they say it, the psychoanalysis can bring new knowledge on how the unconscious can speak through us, beyond explicit intentions. Analysing rhetoric as a medium for desire, we can see how subjective desire is assembled through discourse, showing new layers of subjectivity in the way of perceiving the world.¹⁷

3 Basic hypothesis and proposed theoretical approach

My hypothesis is the focus of the antifeminist demand on the second (sexuality, family, reproductive rights), third (individualism, diversity, womanhood and gender) and fourth (gender norms, marginalization of women, and body shaming) waves of feminism. I believe the demands of the first wave (suffrage) are now hegemonic in the country.

To analyse the anti-feminist rhetoric and practice the theoretical approach complements the dominant approaches related to the topic, so I will follow the Essex School of Discourse Theory. The approach will bring rhetorical studies with psychoanalysis, showing how public speech manage desires¹⁸. I will analyse the Brazilian case considering the radical contingency and structural incompleteness of the systems of social relation, which shows the impossibility of closure of any social totality. One of the key elements of the analysis will be the notion of identities and the lack of their constitution, that is filled with the illusion that a subject can be whole and fulfilled. The subject “becomes” by attempting to fill this lack, and struggles repeatedly¹⁹. For example, in the Brazilian case, the illusion is that their social completeness would happen if the Left parties did not exist and were not expanding, which would make the subjects fulfilled.

The lack that exists on the identities is also present in society, and it is what allows any discourse to become hegemonic - and what allows hegemonic changes. The lack existent in society, then, exposes the impossibility of complete meaning fixation. As defined by

¹⁷ MARTIN, James. *Psychopolitics of Speech*. Bielefelde: Transcript-Verlag, 2019.

¹⁸ *Idem*.

¹⁹ DRIVER, Michaela. Struggling with lack: a Lacanian perspective on organizational identity. *Organization Studies*, v.30, n. 1, p. 55-72, 2009.

Glynos²⁰, “it is because our symbolic representations of society are constitutively lacking that politico-hegemonic struggle is made possible”, which makes society exist as totality only when the social subject posits its existence through the mediation of empty signifiers, that appears to promise fullness.

Hegemony is then to carry out the filling function of meaning to the empty signifiers. One example given by Glynos²¹ is the master signifier “Justice for all”, in which different concrete contents present themselves as the filler of the signifier, such as feminism and environmental. The hegemony would happen when “Justice for all” would mean equity between men and women, or when we respect the environment in our production of goods. In our case, for Bolsonaro, the signifier “God above everyone” promise fullness if God is put as a priority. In that sense, the lack is attributed to an antagonist, which is responsible for preventing us from becoming who we want to be²². As we will see in the next chapters, in Bolsonaro’s government our antagonism is the Left, which prevents Brazil from becoming the country that the subjects want.

Other concepts are also essential for the analysis of antifeminism in Brazil. We should consider the subject as subject of desire, and desire is what comes from the dissatisfaction when a demand is met. Lack, then, penetrates discourse in two ways: the emergence of an empty signifier that tries to unify the symbolic structure and the search for an illusory enjoyment.²³ Related to the latter, to analyse social phenomena we should also comprehend fantasy.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the concept of fantasy promises to fill the lack - it is a construction that projects for the subject an image of fullness, telling the subject how to desire, and at the same time constitutes itself against antagonism²⁴. This narrative is built to give the impression that enjoyment is possible has two main components: the ideal, that is what the subject can desire, and the obstacle, that transforms the impossibility into a difficulty.

²⁰ GLYNOS, Jason. The grip of ideology: a Lacanian approach to the theory of ideology. *Journal of political ideologies*, v.6, n. 2, p. 197, 2001.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 191-214.

²² LACLAU, Ernesto. *New reflections on the revolution of our time*. London: Verso, 1990. ŽIŽEK, Slavoj. *The sublime object of ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.

²³ MÜLLER, Martin. Lack and jouissance in hegemonic discourse of identification with the state. *Organization*, v. 20, n.2, p. 279-298, 2013.

²⁴ BRAUNSTEIN, Nestor. *Desire and Jouissance in the Teachings of Lacan*. The Cambridge Companion to Lacan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 102-115. GLYNOS, Jason; HOWARTH, David. *Logics of critical explanation in social and political theory*. London: Routledge, 2007.

Lacan approaches the subject in three different registers: the imaginary, which are images in which the subject identifies itself as complete and autonomous; the symbolic, which is the language and the structured systems through the subject enter intersubjective (or social) relations; and the real, that are the energies excluded from the first two²⁵. The symbolic is especially important in the discussion of trying to end “gender ideology”, since we internalise those systems of meaning profoundly, with the consequence of our relationship to the world being inconceivably without them. We express our unconscious desires based on what we internalize from the symbolic order.²⁶

Finally, to demonstrate the plausibility of my basic hypothesis and claims, I will address Laclau’s view and interpretation of populism, since Bolsonaro is a far-right wing populist it is important to focus also on the demands of the chain of equivalences. The theory of ideology, then, can help us account on how ideology grips its subjects considering the specificity and contingency of socio-historical traditions and their systems of meaning²⁷. I will also use the techniques of James Martin’s books “Politics and Rhetoric” and “Psychopolitics” to analyse the government’s rhetoric through psychoanalysis, focusing on the political aspect through strategies of ethos (character), pathos (emotion) and logos (reason). As James Martin said, in rhetorical argumentation is tense relation between the symbolic and imaginary dimensions of the subject and the way we represent our desires.²⁸

4 Research Strategy, Methods, and Corpus

My research strategy is focused on the search for fantasy on the government discourse. A subject’s fantasy is correlated with social fantasy, and we can find the latter on the margins of ‘public official discourse’²⁹. I will, then, understand what are the concrete meanings reproduced by the government that structure terms such as “women”, “men”, “gender”, “gender ideology”, “abortion”, and are trying to become hegemonic - an universal ideological notion. With this in mind, as said by Žižek³⁰, what sustains the meaning as ideologically hegemonic is fantasy. To pursue fantasy, I shall look for the elements that show its presence: excess of enjoyment, theft of enjoyment, oscillation of enjoyment and contents

²⁵ LACAN, Jacques. *The Seminar. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-54*. Trans. John Forrester. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1988, p. 73.

²⁶ MARTIN, *Psychopolitics of Speech, cit.*

²⁷ GLYNOS, The grip of ideology, *cit.*, p. 191-214.

²⁸ MARTIN, *Psychopolitics of Speech, cit.*

²⁹ GLYNOS, The grip of ideology, *cit.*

³⁰ ŽIŽEK, Slavoj. *The metastases of enjoyment: Six essays on women and causality*. London: Verso, 2005.

that are promulgated as ‘typical’ of the universal notion. I will also use the rhetoric strategies from James Martin’s book “Politics and Rhetoric” and “Psychopolitics”, in that way I will use the rhetorical political analysis to operationalize the discourse theory and psychoanalytic approach. With this goal, I will analyse Damares Alves, Michelle and Bolsonaro’s speeches, interviews, and appearances (which are in Portuguese, but translated by the author) since Bolsonaro’s campaign and government, from 2019 until 2021.

It’s important to highlight the choice of analyzing Bolsonaro’s government’s rhetoric instead of, for example, some of the antifeminist movement’s spokespersons. The reason for this is mainly the hegemonic aspiration of the Evangelical and Pentecostal groups in the country, that have been entering the Brazilian politics and acquiring power since the 1990’s, becoming even an important coalition for any government in power. The aspiration is based on theological ideas from conservative and fundamentalist evangelicalism (e.g. dominion theology, reconstructionism, prosperity gospel and spiritual warfare) – very related to antifeminist arguments, and this process is one of the reasons that culminated to Bolsonaro’s election, that keeps close contact to Pentecostals and evangelicals as administrators in his government, as we will see later on with the example of his minister Damares Alves³¹.

To analyse the government’s rhetoric and grip, I used the strategy of exhaustion, which means I investigated their speeches and appearances until I could see clearly the patterns and repetitions of their strategy related to antifeminism. For the analyses I abundantly used their most symbolical appearances (e.g. Bolsonaro’s first speech to nation as president; first speech to Congress as president; speech on the March of Jesus, where most of people present support Bolsonaro; Damares Alves first speech as Minister), but also watched over 60 other appearances and interviews - which are mostly available on Youtube - that discussed the themes of this paper, of which I chose the quotes that better represented the government’s views on woman, feminism, gender ideology and abortion. Because of the pandemic of Covid-19, most of the comments from 2020 onwards are about the pandemic, so the evidence about feminism becomes scarcer. Although many topics appeared during the research, I chose to focus on the themes gender ideology, abortion and women. Other topics that emerged are, for example, woman’s security, domestic violence and human rights for criminals. Although all of them are important to capture the full picture of Bolsonaro’s

³¹ BURITY, Joanildo. The Brazilian Conservative Wave, the Bolsonaro Administration, and Religious Actors. *Brazilian Political Science Review*, v.15, 2021.

support related to feminism, I chose the first three because they are profoundly related to what I call fantasy of gender binarization, a crucial discussion of feminism internationally and on all its waves.

In the next sections I will first present the government's populist government and their fantasy, then I will analyse how the government uses ethos, logos and pathos strategy to persuade and to stabilise their base in relation to its fantasy. Finally, I will connect their emotion strategy to theft of enjoyment of children's innocence, creating high levels of anxiety in the country related to the slow change of the symbolic order.

5 The far right-wing government

Bolsonaro was elected in 2018, in a scenario of a polarized country, that requested a change after the corruption scandal Car Wash. With the anti-PT³² speech, the use of social networks and firm positions, especially in the area of public security, Jair Bolsonaro managed to defeat the opponent Fernando Haddad with a difference of 10 million votes. Among the converging opinions, one stands out: the authenticity of the candidate's speech for a voter tired of accusations of corruption and disillusioned with the economic crisis. Bolsonaro was elected by evangelicals (70% of this group voted on him), men (10% more than woman), and people that were against PT (30% of the population that was against the former party voted for Bolsonaro). It was new for the Brazilian politics this separation between gender and religion on the voters.³³

Right after Bolsonaro was elected, it was common to hear on the speeches of the government the claim for a new and different country:

“They said that we lived in utopia, in dreams, but look where our dream brought us: in a new Brazil, in a new moment for this nation”³⁴

“I take advantage of this solemn moment and call on each of the congressmen to help me in the mission of restoring and rebuilding our homeland, definitively freeing it from the yoke of corruption, criminality, economic irresponsibility and ideological submission. We have before us a unique opportunity to rebuild our country and to rescue the hope of our compatriots. Let's unite the people, value the family, respect religions and our Judeo-

³² Partido dos Trabalhadores was the party involved in the corruption scandal Car Wash, which brought high levels of distrust towards politicians in Brazil.

³³ ITUASSU, Arthur. *Afinal, quem votou em Bolsonaro?*. Ituassu, 2020.

³⁴ ALVES, Damares. *Ceremony for the transfer of office to the Minister for Women, Family and Human Rights*. 2019.

Christian tradition, fight gender ideology, preserving our values. Brazil will once again be a country free from ideological ties”³⁵

Considering Laclau’s theories on populism, for the emergence of a popular identity we need the presence of an empty signifier that constitutes an equivalential chain. This equivalential inscription then gives stability to the demands, but also restricts it, since it must operate in the parameters of the chain. These demands are then equivalential to each other on their opposition to the oppressive regime, which leads for one of the demands becoming the signifier for all of them³⁶. For Bolsonaro’s government, the signifier “Brazil above everything, God above everyone”, which he uses in most of his speeches, are related to many different demands: to end corruption, to privatize the public sphere, to end violence, to give power to citizens of good with guns, to prioritize the economic sphere, to make Brazil a powerful nation, and the subject of this article, to regain the moral values of the traditional family and retain the binary distinction of gender and its roles. With those demands, he constructs his “people” that are opposed by the former Left government, which was to blame to all the destruction of the Brazilian values through corruption and policies that considered minorities in the country. In his words: “minorities have to bow down to majorities; minorities fit in or simply disappear”³⁷.

As the master signifier has a special relation to the importance of family, gender and religion, I argue that the binary genderization of society is an important part of the fantasy that is sustaining the desire of bolsonarists, telling them how to desire their social completeness. Included in this idea is the narrative of fixed sex roles and the threat of gender ideology and abortion.

6 The fantasy of binary society

I will argue on this section that Bolsonaro’s rhetoric tries to perform with his ethos, logos and pathos; his view on women; and the way he organizes his ministry a restrictive discourse on gender that focuses on the distinction of man and woman - an exclusive form to interpret gender and its various forms - which leads to a regulatory operation of power³⁸. This regulation, then, naturalizes the hegemonic instance and stops the thinkability of its

³⁵ BOLSONARO, Jair. *Bolsonaro's speech at the inauguration in Congress*. 2019.

³⁶ LACLAU, Ernesto. *On populist reason*. London: Verso, 2005.

³⁷ Bolsonaro’s statement in 2017 on a rally on Campina Grande.

³⁸ BUTLER, *Undoing gender, cit.*

disruption on various forms. I will finish the section discussing the theft of enjoyment of children's innocence.

6.1 Ethos, pathos and logos

Bolsonaro's government presents his version of society, his fantasy, in gendered terms. As the antifeminists before him, the president shows repeatedly the importance of the traditional family, in which men and women have different roles and identities, in his words: "family is a man and a woman"³⁹. To begin the understanding the power of persuasion of this narrative and discourse, we will use James Martin's strategy, as established in his book "Politics and Rhetoric"⁴⁰, so we can comprehend the character of the government's antifeminist rhetoric and practice. The author makes clear that rhetoric is persuading, mainly, through symbols. In that aspect, the symbol can be established in the person that is speaking, called the "ethos", a strategy that appeals to the authority or character of the speaker, bringing up the speaker's entitlement to speak.

Bolsonaro makes his subjects trust him as a genuine source of the judgment he defends modelling his persona⁴¹. He is straight; a family man, with a wife and five children; a military officer; religious; the man that God saved; and has the support of the Brazilians. The president is trying to show for his subjects that he is in fact the right version of a man, the type that can and should be trusted. We can notice this symbolism on some of his speeches:

"I have never been alone. I have always felt the presence of God and the strength of the Brazilian people."⁴²

"[I am] a president who is honoring what he promised during the campaign. Who believes in and values the family."⁴³

"All the time we hear this bad left, PT, Pcdob, Psol, this disgusting Left, saying that the State is secular. The state is secular, but I, Johnny Bravo, am a Christian."⁴⁴

With those explicit appeal to his ethos, Jair Bolsonaro is showing that he can in fact be trusted, listing his moral values and past experiences. He is showing for his supporters that they belong to the same community.

³⁹BOLSONARO, Jair. *March for Jesus in Brasilia*. 2019.

⁴⁰MARTIN, James. *Politics and rhetoric: a critical introduction*. London: Routledge, 2013.

⁴¹*Ibidem*.

⁴²BOLSONARO, Jair. *Speech after winning the election*. 2018.

⁴³BOLSONARO, Jair. *March for Jesus in Brasilia*. 2019.

⁴⁴*Idem*.

While Bolsonaro is the “right” version of a man, considering this binary distinction, his wife is the “right” version of a woman - very similar to the versions that the antifeminist movements fight for. She is refined, modest, self-sacrificing, dignified and domestic women. Cheered by their subjects, Michelle Bolsonaro is compared to the Virgin Mary in conservative media - as the woman that God chose - being also considered the woman the “shut the feminists up” and fits the stereotype of the woman that allows her husband to be as strong as he is. Michelle is usually brought by Bolsonaro in his speeches and interviews, focusing on her characteristics as a mother and religious persona. It is possible to notice her as the “lady” on her own words in an interview given in 2018 to the Youtube channel “Rede Super de Televisão”:⁴⁵

“God, if you give me condition, one day I want to help these people”

“I like to cook; I like to take care of my family. I had the opportunity to be able to stay at home and be able to take care of (the daughters)”

With Jair and Michelle Bolsonaro, the presidential couple divides the society into two: the men and women, and how they should behave in society and in their own families. Different from her husband, Michelle works, but in the jobs that fit the sexed division: as a volunteer, for the poor and blind, as a wife and a mother. In that sense, their ethos is symbolic of the discourse that the government is trying to make hegemonic, with specific roles and behaviour for each of the sexes. As a woman that is also “well positioned” on her job is Damara Alves, the Minister of Women, Family and Human Rights. Her ethos relates to religion, job for the poor and injustice, and motherhood.

Another two strategies are used to persuasion besides ethos, which are pathos (emotion) and logos (reason). When we consider logos, we notice it through the principles and ideologies being asserted: in all the speeches of those three characters, it is also constantly related to the God’s values and what is the truth about society and what is not. If God wants a traditional family, that is the truth we should follow in government and the rest of society. The deductive reasoning behind it is the different roles and identities for woman and man, and the importance of marriage and children. We can see through the example: “The woman must be submissive. Within Christian doctrine, yes. Within the Christian doctrine, within the Church, we understand that in a marriage between a man and a woman,

⁴⁵ BOLSONARO, Michelle. Entrevista com Michelle Bolsonaro - PARTE 1 | SEMPRE FELIZ. Interviewed by Marcia Rezende. *Rede Super Televisão*, 2018.

the man is the leader of the marriage”⁴⁶. As Judith Butler⁴⁷ argues, the argument “It is the law”, as used on the rhetoric strategies related to God, is also a desire for that law to be indisputable.

Finally, when we consider the pathos of his speeches and appearances, the government tries to shape the feelings of the audience. It is possible to notice the trial to generate concern – about the latest government and its consequences to the traditional family and its values – and sympathy with the speaker. I will further develop the use of pathos as a rhetoric strategy and as an important part of bolsonarists’ grip when discussing theft of enjoyment of the traditional family and children’s purity, which can lead to anger and anxiety. Before, it’s relevant to understand what a woman in the government’s narrative is.

6.2 The woman

With those three personalities we can see how, through the rhetoric strategies of ethos, pathos and logos, the government is trying to gender society with specific sex roles and prioritizing the traditional family, using it to persuade new subjects and stabilise the base he already has. This strategy, however, can be noticed beyond the characters that are present in the government. I will argue in this section about the determinism in the government’s view of what a woman is.

The latest feminist wave argue that the category of “women” is produced by the same structures of power through that the emancipation tries to get rid of and that the term denotes a common identity that in fact does not exist. Gender, then, is not constructed consistently trough different times, but intersects with many other different categories: race, class, sex, region and others⁴⁸. Feminism, as said by Butler⁴⁹, tries to establish a universal basis for feminism, looking for an identity that could come from an universal patriarchy, in order to be representative. However, there is no “women” identity outside and independent from their subordination to a hegemonic and masculinist culture. Nevertheless, Bolsonaro’s government presents women as a fixed identity and a sexual figure. We can see through the government’s speeches the characteristics of woman. First, they want a man:

⁴⁶ ALVES, Damares. *Meeting at the Deputy Chamber*. 2019.

⁴⁷ BUTLER, Judith. *Gender trouble*. Continental feminism reader, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 29-56.

⁴⁸ RILEY, Denise. ‘Am I that name?’: feminism and the category of ‘women’ in history. *Springer*, 1988.

⁴⁹ BUTLER, *Gender trouble, cit.*, p. 29-56.

“Everyone would like to spend an afternoon with a prince, especially you women, right?”⁵⁰

They are less worthy if they are “ugly”:

“For God's sake, right. If I call you ugly now, the world is over. All women will be against me.”⁵¹

They are sexual objects:

“Brazil cannot be a gay tourism paradise. Anyone who wants to come here to have sex with a woman, feel free. Now it can't be known as the gay world's paradise in here.”⁵²

And do not deserve as much space in the political arena:

“For the first time in my life, the number of man ministers and woman ministers is balanced in our government. We have 22 ministries, 20 men and two women. Just a little detail, each of these women who are here are equivalent to ten men.”⁵³

As Butler⁵⁴ argues, the attribution of femininity to female bodies as if it were natural takes place in a normative framework in which the connection between femininity to femaleness is one mechanism to produce gender. The discussion of what women are, what gender is, and what are the roles that we should partake on social life has been slowly entering the discussion of politics. Butler argues that an excluded term can enter a polity, but that same entrance is a threat for the coherence of the polity. This situation would establish for that polity an unknown future, provoking anxiety in who wants to patrol the conventional boundaries. In her words: “The desire to foreclose an open future can be a strong one with loss, loss of a sense of certainty about how things are (and must be). It is important, however, not to underestimate the force of the desire to foreclose futurity and the political potential of anxiety”⁵⁵. I will develop this anxiety further on the next section.

We have seen how Bolsonaro tries to shape his government into this binary distinction of men and women using rhetoric strategies, and that part of the Brazilian population has demanded an antifeminist response to the new president. We saw on this section what are the concrete meanings reproduced by the government that structure the terms “women” and “men” and are trying to become a universal ideological notion. As we saw before, what sustains the meaning as ideologically hegemonic is fantasy. It is possible

⁵⁰ BOLSONARO, Jair. *President about Saudi Arabia's prince Mohammed bin Salman*. 2019.

⁵¹ BOLSONARO, Jair. *President comment to journalists*. 2019.

⁵² BOLSONARO, Jair. *Speech on Women's Day*. 2019.

⁵³ *Idem*.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 29-56.

⁵⁵ BUTLER, *Undoing gender, cit.*, p. 140.

notice the first signs of fantasy on those contents that are promulgated as ‘typical’ of the universal notion.

6.3 The threat to children’s innocence

I argue in this section what I consider the two most important themes that accounts for the grip among the members of Bolsonaro’s base when considering antifeminism. The first is the pathos in the rhetoric strategy, that shapes the subject feelings towards a specific situation – in the case of gender ideology and abortion, the anxiety of having children that do not fit in the “male” and “female” biological distinction and the anger against feminists that support “killing babies”, through theft of enjoyment. I argue next that we have, in psychoanalytic terms, a symptom in the Brazilian society, which is the combination of the emotion charge of rage and the signifier “children’s innocence”, connected to gender ideology, abortion, and the traditional family. With this grip, the government propagates the binary gendered fantasy and tries to limit the slow change of the symbolic order.

The categories of enjoyment and fantasy can help us link the affective and symbolic dimensions of the government’s discourse related to antifeminism. As argued by Chang and Glynos⁵⁶ feelings of rage can be understood with the psychoanalytic notion of “theft of enjoyment” - which means, in Lacan’s theory, that we look for our sense of being by imagining how the Other enjoys. In that sense, the Other’s enjoyment is a parameter for our own enjoyment. On their words: “And insofar as the Other’s enjoyment is premised on the subtraction by the Other of our own “rightful” enjoyment, this tends to generate a powerful affective response”⁵⁷. In summary, to produce rage, it is necessary to attribute enjoyment to another figure and see it at our expense.

The charge of this emotion is related to the subject’s fantasy and how they are invested in the narrative: the more his base is connected to the new era of Brazil, the importance of reconnecting to the tradition values, God, and the binary distinction between woman and man; bigger is the chance of the threat of its disruption and the association of theft of enjoyment. An important aspect of understanding the significance of emotion in social practices is mapping them in relation to the fantasies that organize the subjects enjoyment⁵⁸.

⁵⁶ CHANG, Wei Yuan; GLYNOS, Jason. Ideology and politics in the popular press: The case of the 2009 UK MPs’ expenses scandal. *In*: Discourse theory and critical media politics. *Springer*, p. 106-127, 2011.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 106-127.

The growth of feminism in Brazil and the discussion of the latest wave made reality appear to diverge from this same fantasy, which shows the feminist version of reality as threatening. We can see this threat when the Minister Damares relates abortion to innocent blood and blame feminists on disrupting the enjoyment of allowing children to live:

“Life, our greatest good, is the starting point. This ministry was designed and structured based on it, its protection and its care. As long as it depends on this government and this team, innocent blood will no longer be shed in our country. This is the Ministry of life; I also say life in abundance”⁵⁹

“[STF] Is full of feminists who have a single agenda that is the liberation of abortion. I want to remind you Minister that this is a pro-life government, it’s a pro-family government, so please.”⁶⁰

Abortion, a request from feminists in the country, is then a threat for the values of the government and its fantasy for the country, stealing the families and children’s rights. Complement to that, it is the idea of women’s duty to have her child and be a mother. With the abortion example we can notice how the fantasy is sustaining the desire of part of Bolsonaro’s subjects, with the construction of a fragile and innocent baby that needs protection from a threatening ideology.

It is possible to notice an overdetermination on the signifier “children’s innocence”, putting abortion and gender ideology as guilty for breaking the morally innocent and biologically determined Brazilian kids. However, the fight against abortion is located in the pre-symbolic sphere, while gender ideology threatens how children will enter the symbolic. I argue next that the signifier is an attempt to construct the symbolic that will form the subjects with specific values and stop its slow change, goal of some feminist movements.

Glynos⁶¹ argues that it is a condition that a subject identifies with an empty signifier that its desire can be aroused and, then, give its content: “there is no symbolic representation without fantasy, that is, the subject (\$) is constitutively split between S1 [master signifier] and a [fantasmatic object]; it can represent itself in S1, in a signifier, only in so far as the phantasmatic consistency of the signifying network is guaranteed by a reference to [the fantasmatic object]”. Which means that if a fantasy is radically put into question, the consistency of the symbolic reality become less consistent. What Bolsonaro’s government

⁵⁹ ALVES, Damares. *Ceremony for the transfer of office to the Minister for Women, Family and Human Rights*. 2019.

⁶⁰ ALVES, Damares. *Ministry meeting about Covid-19*. 2020.

⁶¹ GLYNOS, *The grip of ideology, cit.*, p. 24.

is trying to stop is the disturbance of this symbolic reality, that for him and his subjects is very related to the difference between men and women. We can see examples of this when they speak about gender ideology, that puts into question this norm that many consider the bigger true, determined by God himself, as we saw with the logos strategy.

“I am a president the believes in the family, that is going to respect the children’s innocence. Gender ideology is from the devil”⁶²

“It is a new era in Brazil: boys wear blue and girls wear pink”⁶³

The threat of gender ideology was abundantly used by Bolsonaro’s government to gain and retain power in the country. However, the main object for this hatred was what he called “gay kit”, one of the fake news that made part of the population believe that the previous government was teaching about gender ideology to kids of 6 years old. In reality, the policy was called “School without homophobia”, and it was to help teachers to deal properly with LGBT students - a policy that was never put into practice. Here is an example:

“The gender ideologues say that there isn’t girl, there isn’t boy, there is no princess, there is no prince, we go against that. We won’t impose anything; we just want to say this: respect the biological identity of the child. Let’s leave the children alone, people. We will let the children be children in the classroom, if you want to discuss this, do it in the academy. We just want this: let’s treat the children as children in Brazil.”⁶⁴

Nevertheless, what is the symbolic, and why would an antifeminist government try to control it? As explained by Martin⁶⁵: “the subject enters into the world of symbolic differences not only by acquiring speech but also by accommodating the roles and functions in its family and, later, other social systems. In that respect, the symbolic domain encompasses not only verbal structures but all patterns of social organisation. Collectively, these systems constitute a whole ‘symbolic order’ that overwrites the subject’s imaginary identity and coordinates it by relating to other”. It is clear that the goal of gender theory is the discussion of what is gender, how does it come to be, and what would happen if we were to destroy the binarization of it. However, when Bolsonaro and his government argue that this is not a topic for children to learn in school, and that we cannot force our ideologies into them, he is constructing the symbolic Other that will coordinate the child in his/her/their future social relations. If the symbolic decentres the subject, allowing it to take different

⁶² BOLSONARO, Jair. *March for Jesus in Brasilia*. 2019.

⁶³ ALVES, Damares. *Minister comment to supporters*. 2019.

⁶⁴ ALVES, Damares. *Ministra de Bolsonaro ACABA com a IDEOLOGIA DE GÊNERO em entrevista a GLOBO. GLOBO*. 2019.

⁶⁵ MARTIN, *Psychopolitics of Speech, cit.*, p. 66.

positions in numerous identities, such as daughter, sister, citizen, engineer; the government wants to enforce the identity of “man” and “woman” into one of those identities, with specific roles to follow⁶⁶.

Lacan⁶⁷ argues that man’s desire is the desire of the Other. Which means that what we take as our desire is bound to achieving recognition from the Other. The child’s desire when it grows up, then, will be the desire of the Other as determined by the hegemonic notion that the government tries to put forward (God, the family, society), translated into binary terms. The theft of enjoyment on the gender ideology example is the theft of being able to raise your children on the way you feel best fit. It is correlated to the threat of an ideology in schools that will corrupt their identities, creating a chance of them become something else than “men” and “women”.

In conclusion, we could see on the analytical chapters two signs of the gender binarization fantasy on Bolsonaro’s government: theft of enjoyment and contents that are promulgates as ‘typical’ of the universal notion. Excess of enjoyment and oscillation of enjoyment did not appear as much on the research, but they can be found on the fake news related to feminism and on bolsonarists WhatsApp groups. Because of the limits present on this paper, it was not possible to investigate them as well. However, it would be important to analyse them in future research.

7 Conclusion

The discussion present in this paper englobes a society that is slowly changing but have met in the way a government the uses its power for regulation: what we are and what we can be⁶⁸. Foucault describes this as the politics of truth, a politics that pertains to those relations of power that define in advance what will and will not be considered as truth⁶⁹. The discussion of what is a woman or a man, how we gain a gender, and to become a mother is also the discussion of what a person will become in the symbolic order, if the terms are determined before their very existence.

We found important similarities on the analysis to the previous studies about antifeminism, such as the importance of motherhood, family and country⁷⁰; the view that

⁶⁶ MARTIN, *Psychopolitics of Speech*, cit.

⁶⁷ LACAN, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Tavistock, 1977.

⁶⁸ BUTLER, *Undoing gender*, cit.

⁶⁹ BUTLER, Judith; SPIVAK, G. C. *What is critique?* Concern, v.30, n. 2, p. 225-248, 2015.

⁷⁰ WELTER, Barbara. *The cult of true womanhood: 1820-1860*. American Quarterly, v.18, n. 2, p. 151-174, 1966.

feminist demands want to restructure society, remould the children to conform with their liberal values instead of God's⁷¹; and the importance of Religion as the framework that validates moral absolutism⁷². Also, we notice that Brazil is part of the transnational phenomenon that is happening against the last feminist wave as a right-wing populist government.

We can notice through the analysis the focus of the antifeminist demand on the second, third and fourth waves of feminism. There was no indication on the government of taking the rights for women's voting, so it's safe to argue that the first wave has now become hegemonic. However, different from my first hypothesis, the backlash became stronger not only through political and economic crisis, but also with the hegemonic aspirations of the religious sectors on Brazilian society, which needs a deeper understanding on the current literature.

I have argued that Bolsonaro's government uses rhetoric strategies to hegemonize his meanings for these concepts that are constantly present in the latest feminist wave. As many antifeminists before him, man and woman are different in their bodies and roles in society, abortion is murder, and gender ideology will corrupt the children and turn them into something different, something that does not fit the fantasy of the traditional family and should be excluded of what is considered "real".

However, when trying to mould the symbolic order in which children will become and find their new identities, this hegemony will always encounter also the limits of its conditions, once it is present in a social world that is contingent and never complete. I tried on this paper to understand how the terms of gender are instituted and naturalized in Bolsonaro's government, but he is part of a failed task. We are today on the highest moment in which the binary system is also disputed and challenged, and the consistence of those categories are constantly put into question.

In conclusion, it is important that the research about antifeminism in Brazil and other countries keep growing, since there are many questions left unanswered. What is the strategy of the religious sector to become hegemonic? What are the thoughts of a feminist religious person? How does the public opinion related to gender ideology changes through different generations? Answering those questions can help us on the path to make feminism a hegemonic notion.

⁷¹ SCHLAFLY, *The Power of the Positive Women*, cit.

⁷² PETCHESKY, *Antiabortion, antifeminism, and the rise of the New Right*, cit., p. 206-246.

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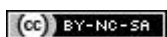
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