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**BETWEEN SCIENTIFIC
AND HEALTH
NEGATIONISM:
THE BOLSONARIST
RHETORIC IN THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC¹**

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CONSIDERATIONS YOU INITIATE

In this text, we will evaluate the argumentative organization of the political theory of President Jair Bolsonaro in relation to the pandemic of the new coronavirus. Therefore, in the first section, we will make a historical overview of epidemics in the country; in the second, we will relate the health and scientific denialism to the political posture of the head of the national executive; finally, in the third section, we will analyze five of his statements regarding the current health crisis.

EPIDEMICS NO BRAZIL: BRIEF HISTORICAL

The conquest of the Americas, including, of course, the Brazilian territory, also resulted from the use of epidemiological weapons, with significant effects on what Todorov (1982) considers the greatest genocide ever carried out in human history. Even at the present, there are still accusations in this regard. According to Angatu (2020, s/p): “The contamination, whether intentional or not, served and still serves to despoil indigenous lands and for the continuous genocide of native peoples”.

Despite this, it was only in the mid-19th century that Brazil faced its first major urban epidemic: that of yellow fever. Transmitted by the hitherto unknown *Aedes Aegypti*, the outbreak caused approximately 4,000 official deaths in Rio de Janeiro, in a population of around 200,000 inhabitants. Proportionally, today, this would be equivalent to about 130 thousand deaths of cariocas (WESTIN, 2020).

In 1850, the pronouncements of some senators about this epidemic reveal lexicons and arguments similar to those proffered today. Bernardo Vasconcellos (MG) talks about “too much terror”. For Limpo de Abreu (MG), “the disease is not so serious” and “[t]he population’s panic and terror are not justified”. Viscondede Olinda (PE) accuses his

colleague Costa Ferreira (MA) of “socialism” for defending public spending on “the poor”. Holanda Cavalcanti (PE) defines the expenses with the creation of Public Hygiene, the lazarettos and the vaccine institute as “waste of public money”, and accuses the doctors of taking financial advantage of the diseases. Dantas Barros de Leite (AL) calls the quarantines “vexatious and absurd” (WESTIN, 2020).

In the opposite direction, Dom Pedro II visited hospital facilities, created “public aid” – with isolation hospitals, infirmaries, doctors, medicines and food – and allocated extra resources to the *Santas Casas*, which functioned as places of care for the underprivileged. In April 1850, he approved, for example, the sum of 100 contos de réis for this purpose (WESTIN, 2020).

According to Chalhoub (2020), in 1855, there would still be a violent manifestation of cholera cases. there was always a concern to balance the fight against the disease with the economic damage it caused”. In 1904, the combination between the Vaccine Revolt and the anti-vaccination position of sectors of the elite, the press and politicians, amid an outbreak of smallpox, contributed to 3,500 official deaths in the then Brazilian capital (CHALHOUB, 2020), in addition to favoring the fact that, a few years later, in 1908, the same disease was responsible for 6,500 deaths, 2020 registered (BVOC).

A decade later, in 1918, the Spanish flu caused approximately 35 thousand fatal victims in Brazil. For Tomé (2020), President Venceslau Brásfora’s denialism is decisive to undermine the fight against the disease. As at present, the “initial disbelief”, the “popular misinformation”, the precarious “health system”, the “unhealthy social conditions” and the “circulation of rumors of miraculous cures” aggravated the consequences of the flu, especially for the poorest (TOMÉ,

2020). However, in contrast to the situation experienced today, the President and the directors of Health did not suggest saving drugs, such as “quinine salt”, preserving the authority of scientific and medical-sanitary knowledge (SCHWARCZ, 2020).

More recently, from 1971 to 1975, Brazil experienced the biggest meningitis outbreak in its history, with around 67,000 cases and an imprecise death toll. In the midst of the “Economic Miracle”, the military government hid the disease, prevented doctors from giving interviews and used the National Security Doctrine to censor reports in the press. The absence of current digital social networks made it easier to hide the health crisis. However, at present, these same networks potentiate the spread of rumours, lies and false news (LEMOS, 2020).

However, denialism was not accompanied by the authorities encouraging the population to expose themselves to the disease, nor by encouraging the invasion of civilians to film hospital wards. The rulers of the period also did not intervene in clinical protocols, suggesting remedies against the disease and pressuring health professionals to prescribe drugs without scientific proof of efficacy in the treatment (LEMOS, 2020).

Health denialism is characterized by the concealment, by state representatives, of public health crises in order to maintain political projects and preserve the economy. Although they deny the epidemic, they do not necessarily delegitimize science to perform the bureaucratic calculation between “saving the economy” and “saving lives”. Health denialism boycotts the creation, management and execution of public health policies. It then becomes an interface between politics and science. Scientific denialism, in turn, is the denial of the validity of science in the explanation of reality.

Today’s Brazil projects an originality,

that of the meeting of health and scientific denialism with anti-politics, which replaces the institutional rationality of conciliation of conflicts and pacification of the public sphere by encouraging violence. For the first time, Brazilian public representatives suggest to civil society sacrifice as a way to face an epidemic, given that there is no health protection. Such an argument would aim to “prove the veracity of a thesis through the sacrifice of someone who has either an absolute conviction or a great purity of purpose. Sacrifice serves to prove the moral qualities of a person or act” (FIORIN, 2017, p. 164). Let us move, then, to the relationship between denialism and anti-politics.

DENIALISM AND ANTI-POLITICS

During his political career, Jair Bolsonaro was notable for building denialist arguments, although essentially anchored in the refusal to interpret the historiographical interpretation of the Brazilian Military Dictatorship. He became President with the systematic attempt or desilencing of that past or of public exaltation of his crimes without embarrassment. He thus denies established scientific and moral values.

Scientific denialism would be the extreme marginal current of opinion based on the tampering of facts, historical and natural processes to disseminate fraudulent information with the aim of adapting reality to exclusively ideological interests. To this end, it a) distorts scientific theses; b) appeals to sensationalism; c) decontextualizes sources/documents/reports; d) simplifies reasoning through the linear causality of the phenomena; e) defends ideological and moral perspectives to adjust the world to personal/group desires, not the other way around (NAPOLITAN; JUNQUEIRA, 2019).

Jair Bolsonaro adapts such assumptions to the public deliberative arena by opposing the institutional rationality of the Democratic

State of Law, by fighting contemporary health and scientific knowledge, by suppressing ethics in political speech and by trying to destroy the plurality of social opinions that are fraudulent news, contributes to the destruction of the dynamics of public opinion, since the validity of democratic decisions presupposes the factual truth (BUCCI, 2019).

“Like all authoritarian politicians, Bolsonaro presents himself as non-political”, says Nobre (2020, p. 1). According to the author, the Brazilian president uses the government machine to foment institutional and social disorder. This way, his vision of the State would be linked to the logic of war, raising the idea of an enemy, internal and external, to be fought at the center of the polis. Consequently, the culture and politics of death come to confront their democratic counterparts, focused on coexistence and common well-being. In an expression, the *modus operandi* of his political rationality is chaos as a method (NOBRE, 2020).

Avritzer (2020) converges with this perspective by focusing on the concept of anti-politics as the denial of any agreement, negotiation and consensus in the strategy of power. For the researcher, in addition to being loyal to an authoritarian project, Jair Bolsonaro really believed that the Army, the main support group for his government, and chloroquine, a drug that he considers the “miraculous cure” for the virus despite scientific evidence to the contrary, would solve the Brazilian health crisis.

“The president of Brazil operates under the sign of Thanatos, the god of death”, asserts Avritzer (2020, p.18). This would, in his view, explain the dismissal of health ministers Henrique Mandetta and Nelson Teiche and the dismantling of health policies in the midst of the pandemic. If the argument of sacrifice denies science. In parallel, it elaborates a dilemma between health and economics,

projecting “1) a disjunction between two theses; 2) an offshoot of each of them; 3) [an] identical conclusion whatever the chosen alternative” (FIORIN, 2017, p.146).

For Tiburi (2017;2018), current populists often reduce politics to the advertising sphere, transforming their institutional images and public speech into spectacles and merchandise. It is an aesthetics of the absurd, normalizing the paradox and making “cool” what would previously have caused shame in order to arouse the adhesion of civil society. They are anchored, then, in cynicism, as a radical destruction of empathy and civilizing values, making intersubjective relationships unfeasible, less valuing feelings and social conventions, preventing collective constructions of the common. The others, we add, repeatedly use irony to “[...] destabilize the opponent, causing the audience to laugh in favor of the speaker” (FIORIN, 2017, p. 221). That said, let’s analyze their statements.

JAIR BOLSONARO AND THE PANDEMIC

In the rhetorical conception of argumentation, politics is the deliberative process of the polis, which opposes a Proponent, an Opponent and a Third (Auditorium) (PLANTIN, 2008). In this bias, to support his point of view, President Jair Bolsonaro continually opposes a We, as the sum of the presidential I, the government, political and institutional allies and supporters in the collectivity, to an Them, the synthesis of his opponents, such as politicians, State institutions, journalists, communication companies, medical and scientific associations, social movements, international organizations and even countries.

The leader also antagonizes the national economy, linked to employability and capital production, with public health, linked to health security protocols and financial aid

to affected groups and federative entities. He implicitly and/or explicitly he projects such paths as mutually exclusive.

He thus exposes to the public the responsibility of the head of state in having to choose the alternative he deems least harmful to society, as well as the alleged attempts to boycott his institutional plans. For the President, the impact, direct or indirect, of the pandemic would be even greater in case of public health prevalence, since the bankruptcy of companies and the decrease in the flow of business would lead to deaths and despair, in addition to the acute economic crisis. Among its argumentative strategies is to mitigate the severity of the epidemic, as we can see below:

Due to my track record as an athlete, if I was infected by the virus, I wouldn't have to worry, I wouldn't feel anything or would be affected, at most, with a little cold or flu, as that well-known doctor, on that well-known television set [BBC, 2020. March 24] 2020. 10 fatalities].

In this excerpt, Jair Bolsonaro mitigates the risks of death by analogy with common non-fatal respiratory diseases and by the elaboration of a risk group (a modalized Them), excluding himself and his group – athletes/healthy people – from this condition. It therefore creates an internal fracture to the people by excluding a specific layer of society, the sick/sedentary. Whether due to the natural destiny of life, or the responsibility of the individual in relation to his own health, it would be something of a private nature, the President assumes, and not of public management, which must prioritize the majority of the population and the general interests of the nation. Through the idea of an affected minority, he potentiates his thesis that the flu is mild. Qualitatively, the host would be fragile. Quantitatively, the number of fatal victims would be insignificant compared to the whole. Therefore, most of the population would not need to worry.

The media appears by the implied reference

to Rede Globo de Televisão and doctor Dráuzio Varella. Despite the appearance of medical knowledge as the supposed scientific support of the President's argument, it is an irony, which, on the one hand, decontextualizes the technical recommendation of the opponent prior to the health crisis to give credibility to their speech, and, on the other hand, disqualifies them by the expressions “known doctor” and “known on television”. By not naming them, it denies them the full right to voice and marks them as Opponents. A few days later, Jair Bolsonaro declares:

This is a reality, the virus is there. We're going to have to face it, but face it like a man, damn it. Not like a brat. Let's face the virus with reality. Is life. We will all die one day [BBC, 2020. March 29, 2020. 136 fatalities].

Here, the politician mitigates the danger of the virus by the ability to face it and the explicit naturalization of death, absent in the previous example. To confront the disease, he proposes courage, typical of adult male virility. By using a profanity word, he demonstrates the indignation of a public man with personality, temperament and concerns typical of the common citizen, performing the desired manhood for those who must / will sacrifice themselves.

In this excerpt, he claims to be risking not only the lives of the population, but also his own. He seems, then, to fulfill the expectations associated with a political guide and a commander. Masculinity – symbolized by strength, honor and courage – stages a battle, according to the logic of war. Aiming to stimulate his audience by mirroring the head of the nation, he suggests that, in crisis situations, the people are composed not only of mere citizens, but of warriors.

Aware of Brazilian religiosity, especially that of its electorate, fatality seems to be expressed not only by a profane view of the world, given the biological limitations of the

human body, but by the sacred perspective of a final judgment, which everyone will have to face, according to Christian belief. Thus, in addition to political subjects and combatants engaged in the maintenance of civic order and in the confrontation of the enemy, political or natural, it calls for family defenders to war, faithful to divine purposes and designs, which, if questioned or contradicted, would represent a superior infraction of human law. threatening their own spiritual salvation. Social and cosmological hierarchies would demand, above all, humility, obedience and fearlessness. These aspects reappear in the statement below:

And? Am sorry. Want me to do what? I am Messiah, but I do not perform miracles. [...] I regret the situation we are going through with the virus. We deal with families who have lost loved ones, most of whom were elderly people. But it's life. Tomorrow I go [BBC,2020.28April 2020. 5,017 fatalities].

More aggressively, the politician cynically alludes to human impotence, once again associating the mortality rate of the virus with a risk group and naturalizing death. the fatalismo this time it takes the place of politics, the expected locus of collective action, management and deliberation. If there is no possible and effective choice, it exempts itself from social and legal responsibilities. In our view, the profane and sacred naturalization of the consequences of the disease would mean the death of politics, reducing it to external logics that would make it impossible to decide on the best path. Human inability to adapt the world to their desires would, therefore, imply a return to the state of nature, to the empire of the necessary, at the expense of contingency. In overcoming human yearnings, fate seems to be sealed by the laws of God and the universe in this statement, leaving nothing for the political leader to do.

Nevertheless, this anti-political attitude is essentially political, aiming, through indirect

means, to make the alternatives proposed by opponents/enemies unfeasible. The chosen argumentative strategy naturalizes politics to pass as non-ideological. Any attempt to the contrary would be ideological, not public rationality. With this, passivity appears as political action/choice. By accepting death, including your own, you would reach the apex of sacrifice for the greater objective.

If forgetting works as one of the strategies of historical negationism, passivity – simulated as impotence – is configured as an attempt to establish a project of power. The aim is to let “objective forces”, meant as something neutral and inescapable, be able to assume responsibility for something that would require institutional articulation and legal legitimacy. It seeks, therefore, to exempt itself from accusations of inefficient acts of public management and from possible regulatory punishments. In this regard, Ventura (2020) legally discusses the possibility that the Brazilian government is using the epidemic to affect indigenous and other subaltern groups.

The approximation and detachment of the religious discourse when posing as Messiah and then denying it, has the function of demonstrating its limits in the face of the tragic of nature and divine designs, oscillating between cynicism and irony. Solidarity and compassion, typical of religious discourse, become pro forma, if not a mockery of the death of citizens, breaking the political pact that metonymically projects the nation's leader as the symbolic expression of its totality. Almost a month later, the President declares:

We know that we must be concerned about the virus, especially the elderly, those who have diseases, those who are weak, but (without) closing the economy. 70 days closed economy. How long will this last? [...] We're going to face it from there, I'm sorry. I'm 65 years old, I'm in the risk group. [...] I have an obligation as head of state to make decisions. My hands are tied by a decision

of the Federal Supreme Court that delegated these measures to states and municipalities. Videos keep coming to me of people being handcuffed for being on the street. It cannot go on like this. As I told the minister there, privately, that I didn't want him to make it public, it's easy to put a dictatorship in Brazil. The people are scared inside the house [VALFRÉ, 2020.May 26, 2020.24.512 fatalities].

In this speech, the denial of the viral threat is once again anchored in its restriction to risk groups, implicitly suggesting a posture of strength and courage. Recognizing the dangers of the disease, he returns to a kind of cynicism by simulating the fulfillment of the obligations of a political representative and of being moral (fundamentally Christian, in the Brazilian case), lamenting the deaths. Modalization surreptitiously reinforces the negative ethical values and delicate health conditions of the main affected, ensuring the prevalence of the economy as an objective force superior to other aspects of social life.

Thus, he poses himself as an active head of state and then goes back to being impotent. This time, as a result of the legal decisions of the Federal Supreme Court (STF) in favor of States and Municipalities regarding sanitary measures. He then transfers legal responsibility to the Opponent, attributing to him the possible social, political and legal consequences. He proposes, in short, a transfer of responsibility.

Another argumentative strategy present is the inversion of the accusation, positioning itself as a defender of citizens' rights and democracy by attributing to the enemies of the authoritarian positions that it defends, since he was elected with the apology for the Dictatorship and, throughout 2020, participated in different street demonstrations with supporters in favor of closing the Congress and the STF (Federal Supreme Court). More than describing the "fear inside

the house", he intends to encourage it, with the aim of arousing the audience's "hate" against its disaffected.

The transfer of responsibility and the reversal of the accusation seek to de-account the politician for the consequences of the pandemic, to hold their opponents accountable for the same, to call the aggressive manifestation – and the consented sacrifice – to its enemies the actions of violence it promotes. Below, another statement:

As for rest, that's mine. I don't know how to stand still. I'll be dispatching by video conference. [...] I'm impatient, but I'll follow the protocols. The most important care is for your loved ones, the elderly. The others too, but you don't have to panic. Life goes on [BBC, 2020. July 7, 2020,66,741 fatalities].

After contracting the disease, the President tries to inspire a duty to be in the auditorium by exposing his know-how and his *modus vivendi*. It is about indirectly calling the "people" to activity, opposing what would be a capital sin, in the economic and religious sense: laziness. Cynicism in public positions is accompanied by the continuous contradiction of speeches and attitudes. Bolsonaro sometimes stands against the protocols, sometimes in favor. He sometimes suggests medication, sometimes denies that he did it (CORREIOBRAZILIENSE, 2020). It is chaos with the argumentative method, deliberately forgetting what he had said/done before without showing embarrassment.

In speech, he simulates changes, reaffirming the same: the existence of risk groups and the naturalization of life, as a modalized face of the naturalization of death. It starts, then, from the broad classification of "loved ones", which would encompass all family members and friends, to then restrict it to the "oldest". "Others" appear nuanced, without social classification. If it is the function of a political leadership to avoid social "panic", by enunciating "life goes on", the President

normalizes the sacrifice of others by meaning it as inevitable. as if they were accidental deaths, and not the exercise of the sovereign “to dictate who can live and who must die” (MBEMBE, 2018, p.5).

In this bias, the death of the weakest would be justified because they are bodies, organically and morally, devoid of health, strength, courage and honor. That is, of virility. The description of potential victims does not express a medical, scientific observation, but the politicization and moralization of the disease itself. To give in to it would be a deviation from national projects and values, giving rise to laziness and the privileges of those who could confine themselves.

In short, the denialism of President Jair Bolsonaro crosses scientific (Human and Natural Sciences), sanitary and political aspects. Furthermore, by anti-politics, he creates an oxymoron. On the one hand, politics succumbs to the external forces of the economy, nature and divine designs, proposing, instead of contingency and action, submission to objective needs and collective passivity, focusing on the implementation of a necropolitical project. On the other hand, it reduces science and disease to the ideological order, making it possible for political authority to co-opt medical competence itself, which, in turn, becomes a political enemy.

Thus, his arguments are structured in the following ways: (i) normalization of the absurd; (ii) renaming with the purpose of attenuation and/or denial of a given reality; (iii) analogies with common sense knowledge as a way of mitigating, mischaracterizing, disavowing and discrediting political and scientific logics; (iv) irony of the person(s), group(s) or opposing theory(s) (AdHominem arguments); (v) ambiguity as a way of disclaiming responsibility for statements and causing confusion in the audience; (vi) ridicule and cynicism as aesthetic performances and

contempt for civilizing values; (vii) forgetting, silencing and eliminating any contrary thesis; (viii) use of religious knowledge to eliminate political contradictions; (ix) appeal to negative emotions (fear and hate); (x) elaboration of a morally superior and/or mythical image through the use of the virtues of strength, courage, virility and honor, associated with the imaginary of purity, order, war and hierarchy; (xi) cognitive and epistemic falsosymmetry, in which validated knowledge and its destruction for strictly ideological purposes are equivalent; (xii) use of fraudulent news as a means of destroying factual truth in public opinion; (xiii) transfer of responsibility; (xiv) reversal of the charge; (xv) (stimulation of) physical, symbolic and systemic violence against opposing groups; (xvi) elaboration of restricted risk groups as a way of opposing them to the interests and qualities of the majority; (xvii) argument from sacrifice as a way of making human life and dignity secondary; (xviii) reduction of science and epidemic control to (necro) political logic; (xix) anti-politics as a way of implementing hegemonic power projects through the logic of war; (xx) submission of politics to the logics of economy, nature and religion, as supposed objective forces, to simulate deliberative impotence and persuade the public to adhere to ideological choices, considered necessary/inevitable.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the present text, we evaluate the argumentative organization of President Jair Bolsonaro in five pronouncements on the new coronavirus. Therefore, we carried out a brief history of epidemics in Brazil. Next, we discussed the relationship between anti-politics and denialism. As a conclusion, we describe twenty negationist argumentative strategies of the President.

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