

THEMATIC SECTION:  
THE LESSONS OF THE PANDEMIC



## Denial of Politics and Denialism as a Policy: pandemic and democracy

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**ABSTRACT – Denial of Politics and Denialism as a Policy: pandemic and democracy.** The text is developed in three complementary stages: Firstly, we discuss the strategy of denying politics, which allowed President Bolsonaro to reject democratic values without definitively breaking with democracy, employed both during the presidential campaign but also during the pandemic. Secondly, we analyze the strategy of denialism as a policy, important to the understanding of the way thru which Bolsonaro undertook his management of the pandemic. Thirdly, we argue that during the pandemic both strategies were combined, thus producing socio-political phenomena that erode democracy, such as the trivialization of deaths and the naturalization of the cleavage between valuable lives, less valuable lives, and disposable lives.

**Keywords: Denialism. Denial of Politics. Pandemic. Death Banalization. Crisis of Democracy.**

**RESUMO – Negação da Política e Negacionismo como Política: pandemia e democracia.** O texto se desenvolve em três etapas complementares: primeiro, discutimos a estratégia da negação da política, com a qual Bolsonaro afrontou valores democráticos sem romper definitivamente com a democracia, tanto na campanha presidencial como na pandemia. No segundo momento, discutimos a estratégia do negacionismo como política, importante para a compreensão do modo como Bolsonaro empreendeu sua gestão da pandemia. No terceiro momento, argumentamos que durante a pandemia aquelas duas estratégias se conjugaram, produzindo fenômenos sócio-políticos que corroem a democracia, como a banalização das mortes e a naturalização da clivagem entre vidas valiosas, vidas submetidas a processos de menos-valia e vidas descartáveis.

**Palavras-chave: Negacionismo. Negação da Política. Pandemia. Banalização da Morte. Crise da Democracia.**

This article takes the risky experience of reflecting on dramatic events in Brazil at the very moment they are unfolding. Given the urgency of this kind of intellectual task, this text assumes the form of the essay and therefore has no theoretical pretensions to exhaustiveness, aiming only to question Bolsonarism, a political phenomenon whose characteristics seem to have been accentuated during the pandemic of the new Coronavirus.

We understand Bolsonarism as an authoritarian extreme right political movement, which promotes divisions or cleavages (symbolic, economic, cultural, political) between forms of living whose value and meaning is defined thru rigid hierarchic processes of evaluation. One core aspect of Bolsonarism is the distinction between lives that matter and value, those ones that matter a little less, and those which are considered meaningless and worthless, being thus disposable. In a broad sense, Bolsonarism is a way of living, feeling, thinking and relating to oneself, to others and to the world. It is an authoritarian and violent *ethos* that reaffirms and reinforces normative positions of order, security and hierarchy, which are themselves based on patriarchal, heterosexual, Christian, entrepreneurial values and conceptions, alongside with whiteness, hence its racist and discriminatory character. In general, Bolsonarism is against science, critical thought and public education policies, supports censorship against teachers' freedom to teach, especially when it comes to gender and political issues, as well as defunds public universities and frequently intervenes against their administrative autonomy.

As an amalgamation of Brazilian conservatism and authoritarianism, Bolsonarism finds its synthesis in the fantasmatic ideal of the Good Citizen (Duarte, 2020), an imaginary normative construction which comprises in itself values and ideals coming from Christianity, anti-left conservatism, nationalist patriotism, armamentism, machismo, the traditional heterosexual family, meritocracy, the sacrificial economic entrepreneurship – which holds the individual responsible for their social success or failure – as well as ideals related to full-market freedom, to the blunt refusal of public services and servants, in addition to the claim that majorities should have the right to discriminate against minorities, especially those organized in social and political movements. In a more restricted political sense, Bolsonarism aims to strengthen the binary opposition between us/them, friend/enemy, by means of which it intends to minimize and, if possible, to neutralize all forms of opposition and political dissent. It is guided by a paradoxical understanding of democracy, of an authoritarian character, which intends to restrict the rights and liberties of all those whose ways of living do not reflect the Bolsonarist normative ideal of the Good Citizen.

In this text, we will analyze two distinctive features of Bolsonarism, both of them prominent in the way the Federal Government has been *coping* with the pandemic: the strategy of denying politics, condensed in Bolsonaro's self-proclamation as an outsider or as an anti-establishment politician, as well as the strategy of denialism as a policy

to face the pandemic. The text is developed in three complementary stages: in the first moment, we discuss the strategy of denying politics, which allowed Bolsonaro to confront democratic values without definitively breaking with democracy, a strategy that characterized his political statements during the presidential campaign, becoming more and more intensified during the pandemic crisis. In the second moment, we analyze the strategy of denialism as a policy, central to understanding the peculiar way by which Bolsonaro undertook his management of the pandemic. In the third and conclusive moment, we propose the hypothesis that the combination of those two strategies during the pandemic of the new Corona virus further accentuated the crisis of Brazilian democracy, by producing socio-political phenomena such as the trivialization of deaths and the naturalization of the cleavage between valuable lives, less valuable lives and disposable lives. In this sense, it seems to us that Bolsonaro has taken advantage of pandemic to promote his political interests and his conservative and authoritarian worldviews, at least until now.

### **The Strategic of Denying Politics**

Jair Bolsonaro's candidacy for the Presidency of the Republic in 2018 benefited from a previous environment of strong rejection of politics, as well as against traditional politicians. This kind of political environment is certainly not new in Brazil, but it had become more and more widespread and strengthened since the public demonstrations of June 2013. Over a little more than 30 days, those demonstrations evolved from the demands for political measures towards better urban public services, to an unconditional and comprehensive rejection against *all that is there*, the fight against corruption becoming a central claim. The June 2013 demonstrations were an unexpected and enigmatic political event, a sign to be interpreted, which is why there has been a fierce interpretive battle over its political significance. (Bignotto, 2020; Nobre, 2020 and 2013; Maricato et al., 2013) It all started with the demands of the Free Pass Movement (MPL) in large cities such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Goiânia, Florianópolis, Porto Alegre, Curitiba, among other State capitals. Initially, its focus was to fight against the increase of the price of public transportation, with its troubling consequences to the daily life of young people and workers. However, the movement quickly evolved and a significant motto emerged: *It's not just over 0.20 cents!* For a few weeks, a huge crowd of young people took to the streets for their first time to participate in a diffuse political movement. Initially, those demonstrations seemed to deepen the democratic process begun in the country with the social and inclusive policies implemented by the Workers' Party (PT). In fact, the Free Pass Movement had inaugurated in the country a different kind of mass political movement, based on anonymous and creative rebelliousness, fully independent from political parties, but not against them. At the same time, the mainstream media became more and more entrusted with the task of channelling the movement towards the fight against corruption, as well as battling

against the abuses and violence committed during the demonstrations, dividing the protesters into civic ones and the so-called vandals. All of a sudden, however, those demonstrations turned against all political parties and authoritarian forces began to emerge, representing social groups linked to the Brazilian right and extreme right. From the beginning of the demonstrations many intellectuals warned against the political dangers they brought with them, which is why, retrospectively, it became commonplace to say that they were the egg of the snake that hatched in Dilma Rousseff's impeachment. On the other hand, the autonomous, decentralized and horizontal character of the demonstrations also seemed to indicate the possibility of strengthening and renewing Brazilian democracy. Therefore, we do not agree with those who seek to establish a cause and effect nexus between the June 2013 demonstrations and the 2016 impeachment, which seems to be simplistic, although there can be no doubt that it was during that period that the current crisis of Brazilian democracy began to worsen. Newton Bigotto (2020) has analyzed this crisis process developed between 2013-2018 recurring to the political notion of war of factions between social groups oriented by opposed ideological worldviews and particular economic interests, which fiercely fought one another in order to "[...] appropriate state mechanisms to make their points of view prevail at all costs".

The rejection of politics began to deepen during 2014, in the wake of the demonstrations for and against public policies towards organizing the World Cup. There was also the worsening of the economic crisis and the stagnation of the GDP growth, in addition to the inauguration and the gradual intensification of the Car Wash Operation, the juridical investigations which led to the national belief in an unquestionable link between politics and corruption, one insistently emphasized by conventional media and social networks. Dilma Rousseff's tight victory in the 2014 presidential elections led the defeated Party of the Brazilian Social-Democracy (PSDB) to question the validity of the elections, to propose their annulment and also to postulate the impeachment as an alternative to get access to power at any cost. These political stances were also consistently reproduced and reiterated by media campaigns which ended up in stimulating a collective feeling of revolt against corruption, most especially channeled against the Workers' Party (PT). As of March 2015, the country saw the streets flooded by thousands of protesters dressed in the yellow-green t-shirt of the Brazilian soccer team, enraged by the allegations of corruption and the alleged authoritarian excesses of the PT, which was converted into a symbolic contemporary reenactment of the old red communist danger. Fastly, judge Sergio Moro became a national vigilante hero, and the entire political class, but mainly politicians linked to the PT, became red corrupted enemies to be politically eliminated from the national political scenario. During the Car Wash Operation many legal abuses were committed by the very Judiciary, suspending basic principles of the democratic rule of law in the name of fighting corruption. Those illegal measures were not condemned by the media, much to the contrary, they were reinforced and

praised, thus creating a favorable scenario for the approval of the presidential impediment, which finally occurred in a congressional session that many considered as “[...] a stain in the course of Brazilian democracy” (Bignotto, 2020). For instance, Deputy Bolsonaro’s vote publicly praising Dilma Rousseff’s torturer is certainly a milestone regarding the political shift that paved the way for the extreme right’s rise to power.

Michel Temer’s short government (2016-2017) was not spared from investigations and allegations of corruption during the unfolding of the Car Wash Operation. The weakening of democratic institutions, as well as of the main political parties and leaders that had been running for the Presidency of the Republic since the mid-1990s, was thus consolidated. In addition, as Marcos Nobre (2020) observed, “A large part of the electorate was feeling existentially threatened in 2018. They feared for their jobs, for their lives, for the lives of their families, for the religion they professed, for their social prestige” (p. 24). This was how Jair Bolsonaro became a decisive political actor in the country, something almost unthinkable a few years ago. The stab he suffered during the presidential campaign was also a decisive episode, as it allowed his political campaign to establish a highly symbolic link between his body and the Brazilian political body, both battered and at risk of death, as argued by Letícia Cesarino in her acute analysis of the rise of digital populism in Brazil (2019).

However, those were only the previous political circumstances that allowed the construction of Bolsonaro as an outsider, that is, as an anti-system politician, despite the fact that he had been part of it for almost thirty years, although inhabiting its obscure fringes. Certainly, several candidates for political positions in the Brazilian past knew more than well how to capitalize for themselves a diffuse national feeling of rejection of politics. The important aspect here is that only Bolsonaro knew how to convert the electoral strategy of refusing politics into a governmental strategy, thus refusing to negotiate with the political system and also reacting against the rules of the democratic game, although remaining inside of it. Leonardo Avritzer (2019) defined Bolsonaro’s governmental strategy as anti-political, understanding it as “[...] the reaction to the idea that institutions and elected representatives should discuss, negotiate and process responses to issues under debate in the country. Anti-politics is a denial of attributes like negotiation or coalition” (p. 19). For Avritzer (2020), the “alleged anti-corruption fight” (p. 19) in Brazil was a decisive element. Following a similar line of reasoning, Marcos Nobre (2020) stated that “[...] it is no accident that Bolsonaro’s tactic has always involved a refusal to govern” (p. 23). For Nobre (2020), after having won the elections as an outsider candidate, Bolsonaro became hostage to that condition and converted the war against the political system and its institutions into his governmental strategy: “chaos” became his “method”, since he presents himself as the solution to the problems he himself creates (p. 15-16). The denial of politics as a governance strategy is yet another new and disconcerting aspect of Bolsonarism, a movement that not only presents itself publicly as an-

ti-political and anti-systemic, but also acts in order to distort central aspects of the democratic politics, turning them into anti-democratic ones, without having to fully disrupt democracy. Furthermore, by presenting himself as a politician who denies the political system, Bolsonaro was also able to introduce several explicit anti-democratic theses in his speeches. Since they are delivered within the democratic game, they are frequently understood as mere smokescreen or as devoid of more serious political consequences.

A quick survey of Bolsonaro's political statements shows the persistence of his anti-political, anti-systemic and anti-democratic convictions. Among the recent statements by which Bolsonaro consistently aims to deny politics, to promote political denialism and to present himself as an outsider to the political system, we have the following ones: "It is obvious that I am a problem for the system, it is not for this party or that, it is for the system" (2018); "There was no military coup in 1964. Whoever declared the President's position vacant at the time was the Parliament. It was the ruling law at that time" (2018); about the murders and tortures perpetrated by the military dictatorship, he said: "To make mistakes, even in your house, everyone does. Who has never slapped his son's butt and then regretted it? It happens" (2018). Among some of his many statements that are clearly antidemocratic, the following examples can be mentioned: "I often say that I don't say what the people want. I am what the people want" (2016); "We cannot allow harmful ideologies to divide Brazilians. Ideologies that destroy our values and traditions, destroy our families, the foundation of our society" (2019); "Prisoners should have no rights, they are no longer citizens. The purpose of the jail is not to re-socialize, but to remove the criminal from society" (2017)<sup>1</sup> (Constantino; Costa; Eiras, 2020). "This group of communists, if they want to stay here, they will have to place themselves under the law of all of us. They either go outside of the country or go to jail. These red criminals will be banned from our homeland" (2018); "We are going to shoot the reds here in the State of Acre" (2018); "We are a Christian country. There is no such story of secular state, no. The state is Christian. We will make Brazil for the majorities. Minorities have to bow to majorities. Minorities fit in or just disappear" (2017)<sup>2</sup> (Bolsonaro diz que cloroquina..., 2020, online). Finally, let us see some statements with which Bolsonaro appeals to vague democratic ideals, but directs them against the practices and values of democracy: "Firearms, more than guaranteeing a person's life, guarantee the freedom of a people" (2018); "If I want to come in armed here, I will" (2016)<sup>3</sup> (Bolsonaro diz que cloroquina..., 2020, online); "We have a government that respects the family. And for those who have any doubts: paragraph 3 of article 226 of the Constitution. Let's read there what family is. When someone changes the Constitution, I'll speak of the other families" (2019)<sup>4</sup> (Fonseca, 2020).

This brief set of statements denying the political system, professing denialism regarding the dictatorship and its crimes, disregarding democracy or making use of democratic ideals to distort and mischar-

acterize democracy, show that the candidate who was elected to the Presidency of the Republic in 2018 never departed from the old authoritarian ideas that made him (in)famous for his praise of torture, of the closing of the Congress, of indiscriminate murder and of dictatorship itself: “It (the country) will only change, unfortunately, when we go to civil war inside here. And doing the work that the military regime did not do, killing some 30,000!” (1999). His attitude of denying politics as well as of denying democracy did not change during the outbreak of the new Corona virus in Brazil, quite to the contrary. In an anti-democratic demonstration that took place in Brasília on 04.19.20, in which the protesters called for the closure of the National Congress and the Supreme Federal Court, Bolsonaro enunciated what can be understood as the sum of his political strategy of denying politics and democracy. On top of a pickup truck, without a mask, screaming and coughing, Bolsonaro said this much:

We don't want to negotiate anything. We want action for Brazil. What was old was left behind, we have a new Brazil ahead of us. [...] Everyone, without exception in Brazil, has to be patriotic and believe and do their part so that we can put Brazil in the prominent place it deserves. [...] The rascal times are over. [...] Everyone in Brazil has to understand that they are submissive to the will of the Brazilian people. I'm sure we all swore to give our lives for our country one day. We will do what we can to change the destiny of Brazil. [...] No more old politics<sup>5</sup> (Nós..., 2020, online).

Given these statements, we can only agree with Marcos Nobre's (2020) argument, according to which “Bolsonaro's anti-system position is intrinsically linked to his authoritarian project, there is no way to separate one thing from the other” (p. 19). Therefore, it seems misleading to consider such political statements as bravado shouted in the wind. On the other hand, those statements represent the government's political position even during the pandemic, clearly signaling which is the Bolsonarist ideal of nation and of political regime. The pandemic was not a circumstance that caught the government off guard, forcing it to resort to histrionic declarations to cover up its inability to tackle the problem, or simply to buy time. Marcos Nobre has observed that since the beginning of March 2020 Bolsonaro had been informed by the Institutional Security Office about the seriousness of the pandemic. However, that did not prevent him from “[...] going to a demonstration against the Congress and against the Supreme Court on March 15” nor did it avert him from pronouncing, on a radio and TV chain, on March 24, his well-known statement classifying Covid-19 as an ‘innocent *flu* or a *cold*’” (Nobre, 2020, p. 8). If the Federal Government did not plan how to properly deal with the pandemic through concerted and organized public policies at the national level, this was because the President wanted it to be so: more important than fighting the virus was to fight the political system and to take advantage of the chaotic situation to settle accounts with politicians – especially Governors Witzel and Doria



– and officials of his own government - Ministers Moro (Justice) and Mandetta (Health) – former allies who changed their political positions throughout the evolution of the pandemic in the country, thus becoming Bolsonaro’s main political enemies.

More recently, the President has established political connections with an important group of parliamentarians who are members of a large conservative wing of the Congress, in disagreement with the criticisms he had previously directed against that group, associating it with the old venal policies of exchanging favors. However, that alliance is not aimed to political goals such as obtaining approval of his own policies in Congress, since he has not needed it so far when it came to approving his neoliberal reforms, but are intended to protect his mandate and that of his sons from the investigations undertaken by the Supreme Court. Thus, as Marcos Nobre (2020) has noted, in fact Bolsonaro has instituted a “[...] war government not against the virus, but, above all, against impeachment – which includes trying to block judicial prosecutions more broadly” (p. 14). Once again, such political behavior is not simply instrumental and circumstantial, but aims to strengthen Bolsonaro’s political position and his authoritarian ideals. The strategy of denying politics disseminates a conception of democracy that strangely makes it a regime compatible with authoritarianism. Once again, we agree with Nobre (2020) when he argues that Bolsonaro

[...] associates his extreme right positions with the defense of everything that is ethical and decent and identifies the rest - the entire political system - with the ‘left’, that is, with everything that is corrupt and corrupted in social life in general. [...] The ‘true democracy’ is just the one that existed during the military dictatorship (p. 20).

In a word, Bolsonaro has never been primarily concerned with confronting the virus, but with politicizing the pandemic in order to remain in power and to feed his dream of reelection, which will certainly give him more leeway to carry out the gradual implantation of an authoritarian democracy in Brazil. In order to dismiss the impression that the validity of those hypotheses about Bolsonaro’s denial of politics as a governance strategy is restricted to himself and not to his entire cabinet, we need just to watch the long interview granted by the Vice-President Hamilton Mourão to journalist Tim Sebastian, who runs the Deutsche Welle channel’s *Conflict Zone* news program on 10.09.20. In this interview, in addition to defending the honor of Colonel Brilhante Ustra, denying that he was a torturer, despite the fact that he was the only military accused of such practices in the country, Mourão also stated that Bolsonaro’s participation and speeches in many anti-democratic demonstrations should not be taken seriously, as they do not constitute a real *threat to democracy*: “[...] it is much more talk than, say, action<sup>6</sup>” (Sebastian, 2020, online).



## Denialism as a Policy

Certainly, denialism concerning the pandemic has always been present in the President's acts and speeches even before April 2020, and it suffices to remember his countless loud statements about the little flu and the supposed media hysteria about the oversized effects of the virus. However, one aspect that only gradually revealed itself was that Bolsonaro's denial of the pandemic was, from the beginning, an autonomous and effective policy<sup>7</sup> (Roque, 2020a). After all, despite the uncontrolled increase in the number of deaths and contaminations, Bolsonaro's insistence on maintaining denialism about the pandemic has not shaken his popularity rates, on the contrary<sup>8</sup> (Popularidade..., 2020, online). Seven months have passed since the pandemic arrived to the country, and now it seems clear that Bolsonaro's denialism constitutes a policy per se, one that consists of denying, confusing, attacking, ignoring, despising, silencing anyone who is not in agreement with his measures to fight the pandemic, or with the political and moral choices that guide his government.

To some extent, denialism is related to the Freudian discovery about negation, *Verneinung* (Freud, 2014), the subject's psychic ability to deny repressed desires. As Freud says, "To deny something in a judgment means fundamentally: this is something I would rather repress" (2014, p. 23). It is certainly possible to propose social and political diagnoses about repressed desires underlying the unconditional defense of denialism (Dunker, 2020; Swako, 2020), but one should not ignore that denialism is a social and political phenomenon in itself, one whose analysis requires recognizing the decisive importance of affections, emotions and desires in its constitution and propagation (Bucci, 2019). Denialism is a social phenomenon not only because it implies the mass production and diffusion of controversial theses in relation to validated scientific consensus, but also because denialist theses have a direct impact on the behavior of millions of people. Simultaneously, denialism is a political phenomenon because, more often than not, it is associated with the extraction of advantages by economic groups interested in denying or questioning scientific theses and knowledge. This happens most especially when scientific knowledge inspires public policies aimed to transforming collective behaviors and ways of living, thus affecting powerful economic interests. Not by chance, one of the first manifestations of scientific denialism was associated with the denial and delegitimization by scientists of scientific studies that associated smoking with serious diseases to smokers. It is also known that climate denialism was fostered by scientists financed by the interests of oil companies since the 1990s, when the scientific community reached consensus about the effects of carbon dioxide, among other polluting gases, as the cause of terrestrial warming. As Tatiana Roque (2020b) stated, "Since it was impossible to deny anthropic global warming, the only way out was to cross it with controversy<sup>9</sup>".

In addition to delegitimizing or questioning knowledge accepted as true by social institutions qualified to ascribe such qualification, de-

denialism calls into question the authority of scientists, of their scientific methods, as well as the authority and legitimacy of the social institutions which produce and validate knowledge. Furthermore, denying or questioning of the authority of the social institutions responsible for the production of scientific knowledge, denialism also entails forms of collective association characterized by radicalized behaviors, averse to argumentative discussion. The least that can be said is that denialism disseminates and encourages suspicious or indifferent behaviors as to the social value of science, thus producing effects on the behavior of millions of people, who start to make crucial decisions for their own lives based only on what seems most convenient or useful in a given circumstance. We should not disregard the social and political effects derived from the kind of social cohesion formed among denialists, since they become part of a parallel universe, of a peculiar society within which they enjoy feelings of belonging and self-worth that they felt deprived of in the broader social world in which they live. This is why Dunker (2020) observed that denialism produces a social atmosphere where “[...] everything happens as if collective denial makes us more and more immune to doubt. Our belief increases as we reject the belief of others” (p. 5). For this reason, it is also no accident that the social diffusion of denialism parasites or engenders religious beliefs (Dunker, 2020, p. 5), or connects to the formulation of conspiracy theories (Oliveira, 2020): in both cases, feelings of collective belonging are reinforced. In this sense, denialism is powerful not only because it produces confusions, doubts, uncertainties and even serious mistakes, but also because it empowers those who share such worldviews. In the more serious cases of denialism, there happens what José Swako has described in these terms: “Not only does the denialist think he is ‘reasonable’, but it is also mentally impossible for him not to have ‘the reason’<sup>10</sup>” (Swako, 2020).

If there are dimensions of scientific practice and knowledge production that are not politically neutral, it should be noted that, despite the fact that negationism originates from within the scientific field, it proceeds from processes of manipulation, fraying and distortion of scientific procedures, which, however, are unknown to the general public. Nor is it infrequent that denialism might have at its background scientists whose position within the scientific community is irrelevant, questioned or even refused by the very instances that acknowledge scientific recognition. Thus, if on the one hand denialism is not to be confused with, nor should it be reduced to, mere obscurantism or ignorance, on the other hand it can lead to the adoption of dangerous behaviors for human life and for the guarantee of living conditions on the planet. There can be no denialism without the massive social reproduction of denialist theses, which are quickly transformed into denialist opinions, of an immediately accessible character and of strong emotional appeal. Throughout its process of mass social diffusion, denialist theses lose reference to scientific practices and methods, because what matters in fact is the gross and biased politicization of science and scientists.

Denialism tends to become intensified and diversified worldwide in the contemporary context of *post-truth*, characterized as that “[...] environment in which objective facts have less weight than emotional appeals or personal beliefs in forming public opinion” (Bucci, 2019). The *post-truth* phenomenon is directly related to the crisis of authority that has shaken the population’s trust in traditional mediators, particularly the media, which once established communication between scientists, public authorities and the people. With the intensification of the use of social networks, it has become easy and routine to discard the *factual truth* (Bucci, 2019) produced by shared criteria and endorsed by consensus, and thus to multiply lies, rumors and fraudulent information (fake news) through direct, simple, accessible and strongly charged with emotional impacts on the subject, which is transformed from mere receiver into a disseminator of such misinformation. According to Eugênio Bucci (2019),

In social networks, unlike what happened on television or in the cinema, the propagation of messages depends directly on the action of the audiences, in which desire takes advantage over thought. News (fake, fraudulent or even true, it doesn’t matter) only spread as they correspond to emotions, any emotions, ‘positive’ or ‘negative’.

This is why fraudulent news multiply and reverberate much faster than accountable news, fostering misinformation and confusion that feed back to each other. Oswaldo Giacóia has argued that,

Given that the access indicators replace the old verification criteria, there is a risk that this new parameter will generate a vicious circle: the number of accesses is almost always in relation to the potential for attraction contained in the distortion of the message. This means that the evaluation horizon is that of the impact caused<sup>11</sup> (Giacóia, 2020).

Thus, the proliferation of the use of social networks is part of the phenomenon that has been called as *epistemic crisis*, itself associated with the “[...] transition from a regime of truth based on trust in institutions to another regulated by individual belief and personal experience, giving voice to conspiracy movements in which information is a field of dispute over the production of narrative.” (Oliveira, 2020, p. 22) Such a context, as can be supposed, is frankly favorable to the formation and dissemination of numerous and simultaneous forms of denialism, such as those that currently circulate in the networks: climatic-ecological, historical-political, related to gender and sexual orientation, scientific-sanitary, geophysical, etc.

In the case of the new Corona virus pandemic, denialism has become paramount in Brazil under Bolsonaro’s government. The social and political consequences have been more than aggravated, given that not only the disease itself and its effects on the human organism are still relatively unknown to the world medical community, but also by

the fact that medical-scientific recommendations demanded a strong and immediate change in behavior, in the wake of the proposition of informative and preventive public policies by national authorities. Thus, all conditions were given for the Covid-19 pandemic to become a privileged focus for the dissemination of denialist theses, running from the politicization of the virus, to the politicization of medicines such as Chloroquine and Hydroxychloroquine, to the politicization of the World Health Organization and its scientific recommendations, as well as, more recently, to the politicization of vaccines. All of this had a considerable impact on the political relations between the Executive, the Legislative, the Judiciary, Governors of State, Mayors and the population itself, creating a chaotic and favorable environment in which people were led to make decisions appealing to notions that seemed more convenient at the moment. It was in such a context that denialism asserted itself as a policy for governing the population under Bolsonaro's rule.

Given the affinity of Bolsonarism with the bad practices of aggressive use of social networks, including the organized sending of deceptive political propaganda, of fraudulent news aimed at confusing the population and demoralizing political opponents, in addition to hate attacks directed against individuals and social groups who disagree with the President's statements and actions, it would not be surprising that denialism has become a means for the government to cope with the pandemic. Six months after the virus arrived in Brazil, the website *Aos Fatos (To the facts)*, which checks the veracity of presidential statements, counted no less than 653 false or distorted statements by Bolsonaro about the pandemic and about the actions taken by his government, totaling an average of three misleading information per day on that subject between March 11 and September 11, 2020<sup>12</sup>. More generally, Bolsonaro uttered 1417 sentences in which he addressed the topic of the pandemic, and the priority targets of his statements aimed at defending the use of Chloroquine, criticizing the WHO and its health recommendations, and at spreading political attacks against the Supreme Court, State Governors and Mayors, who have all been accused of preventing the President from acting to contain the pandemic in the country. The President also spread well-known denialist theses regarding herd immunity, repeating exhaustively that Brazilians would only be protected from the infection after a percentage between 60-70% of the population had been contaminated. According to that website, this narrative has been spelled out 34 times in order to discredit the importance of social isolation as an effective preventive way for containing the pandemic, a measure that was immediately politicized according to the argument that it would be unnecessary, ineffective, would generate panic and, more importantly, would aggravate the economic crisis, thus destabilizing the Federal Government. Bolsonaro was also the main proponent of the use of Chloroquine on Twitter, repeating the information that the drug would be effective for 21 times. Nine times did the President state that Chloroquine would be the only treatment available against

Covid-19, while at other times he admitted that there was no scientific evidence that the drug was effective, betting, however, that it would be better to use it than not to use it. Like many deniers, Bolsonaro based his affirmations on observational medical studies, considered to be less reliable, as well as relayed on his own individual experience and opinion as a user of the medicine. Finally, consider that Bolsonaro's negative statements about the pandemic were made in lives and interviews published on social networks, quickly reaching millions of citizens and thus multiplying their impact exponentially.

Let us now take a glimpse at some of Bolsonaro's denialist statements about the pandemic and about the ways to deal with the risks of the disease: "After the stab, it will not be a cold like this that will bring me down" (03.20.20); "I'm not buying into those numbers" (03.27.20); "I am unaware of any hospital that is full" (04.02.20); "This virus is like rain, it will wet 70% of you" (04.03.20); "Increasingly, the use of Chloroquine is presented as something effective" (04.08.20); "It looks like the virus issue is starting to go away" (04.12.20); "You don't have to chicken out with this virus" (04.18.20); "It is a neurosis, 70% of the population will catch the virus" (05.09.20); "Lockdown doesn't work" (05.14.20); "People who complain about Chloroquine, so give me an alternative" (06.02.20); "Either WHO works without ideological bias, or we will be out" (05.06.20); "There was an over-dimensioning" (07.07.20); "The majority of the Brazilian population contracts the virus and does not notice" (07.07.20); "If we have no alternative, we go with Hydroxychloroquine" (07.18.20); "You don't have to be terrified about the virus" (07.27.20); "Side effects (on the economy) are more serious than the virus itself" (08.06.20); "Whoever doesn't want to take Chloroquine, don't try to ban it" (08.08.20)<sup>13</sup> (Ribeiro; Cunha, 2020).

The *Aos Fatos* website also raised the information that between March 15 and August 2 the President allowed himself to be photographed or filmed in public for 30 times, disobeying the recommendation of the scientific community regarding the importance of social isolation. More recently, on 08.19.20, Bolsonaro declared that the use of masks has "almost zero effectiveness"<sup>14</sup> (Bolsonaro diz que máscara..., 2020, online), while on 08.24.20 he stated that "[If Chloroquine] had not been politicized, many more lives could have been saved from those 115 thousand that the country has lost so far"<sup>15</sup> (Bolsonaro diz que cloroquina..., 2020, online). On September 3, he stated that "[...] there are many doctors saying that this mask does not protect anything"<sup>16</sup> (Lacerda, 2020). Finally, with the advances in the research and testing of new vaccines, some statements appeared politicizing the issue of non-mandatory vaccination against Covid-19, as well as refusing the Chinese vaccine, Coronavac. On 10.19 the President declared: "Nowadays, at least half of the population says that they do not want to get this vaccine. This is the right of people. No one can, under any circumstances, force them to take this vaccine"<sup>17</sup> (Carvalho; Uribe; Cancian, 2020). Raising the tone of his statements and the politicization of the issue, on 10.21.20 Bolsonaro disallowed his Minister of Health, who shortly before had

announced the signing of a protocol of intentions with the Government of São Paulo for the purchase of 46 million doses of the Chinese vaccine, developed in partnership with the Butantã Institute. Bolsonaro said: "I already had it canceled. I am the President, I do not give up my authority. [...] I would not be buying a vaccine that nobody is interested in, except us"<sup>18</sup> Such statements, by grossly politicizing pandemic issues, aim to produce doubts and uncertainties in the population, at the same time that they fuel denialist movements against the validity of the practice of vaccination in general. As we saw earlier, arguing that the population has the right not to take the vaccine is nothing but a peculiar way of understanding notions about individual rights in order to use them against democratic values, specially in the case of a highly contagious and potentially lethal disease.

This compendium of presidential statements seem to indicate that denialism has gone far beyond the level of the mere diffusion of personal opinions, becoming a paradoxical policy for dealing with the virus and the health conditions of the population, in the place of coherent and organized sanitary policies. The direct consequence of this intense dissemination of denialist theses in the country was the creation of a nebulous social atmosphere, permeated by fanaticism, doubts and uncertainties. In the midst of the confusion produced by denialism as a policy, scientific recommendations aimed at preventing the spread of the virus were unconditionally rejected by the Federal Government, whenever they were contrary to the immediate political and economic interests defended by the authorities. On the other hand, medical recommendations without scientific proof were unconditionally accepted, whenever they met those same political and economic interests, as in the case of indiscriminate advertising in favor of the use of Chloroquine, of its intensive manufacturing by the Brazilian Army, in addition to the dissemination of misinformation about other medicines also lacking proper scientific proof, such as dewormers, among other forms of unconventional treatments to deal with the effects of the virus. How could we imagine that, under such conditions, the Brazilian population could behave in ways that prevented them to being exposed to the risks of contamination and death? It was, therefore, in a context in which denialism was assumed as a policy, filling the void resulting from the absence of organized public policies to prevent the spread of the virus in the country, that we reached the figure of more than 150 thousand killed by Covid-19, over a seven-month pandemic.

### **The Worsening of the Crisis of Brazilian Democracy During the Pandemic**

As we have seen, denialism is not a historically recent social phenomenon, nor is it denial of politics as a marketing strategy for candidates' self-promotion. What is new in the recent Brazilian political scenario is not only that the denial of politics and denialism as such have become specific policies, but also that they have been articulated and



intensified to the point of becoming distinctive features of Bolsonaro's government during the new Corona virus pandemic. This association of heterodox political strategies during the pandemic also offered Bolsonaro the opportunity to generalize and to strengthen the more focused conservatism that had been guiding his manufacture of internal enemies in the context of the delegitimization of past policies for the recognition of rights to historically marginalized populations, such as poor, black, women, LGBTI +, indigenous and traditional populations. During the pandemic, Bolsonaro converted the strategies of denial of politics and of denialism as a policy into effective weapons for his political self-promotion and self-preservation, and he seems to have won the bet, at least so far. In spite of its disastrous social and political consequences, revolt and indignation against his misdemeanors during the pandemic seem to have lowered down or even disappeared, in comparison with what was happening until mid-June-July 2020: the collective beating of pots at the windows have disappeared, as well as those incipient attempts at popular mobilization against the actions and omissions of the Federal Government. How can we understand this somewhat paradoxical political situation?

At the conclusion of this essay, we would like to propose the hypothesis that the association of the strategies of denial of politics and of denialism as a policy would have produced a certain effect of collective anesthesia throughout the country. Apparently, one of the political effects of the population's prolonged exposure to the repeated statements by which the President minimized the drastic consequences of the pandemic, as well as ignored the pain and grief over so many deaths, may have been collective exhaustion and fatigue, as if people stopped waiting for any form of care and consideration, and for any effective measure to combat and prevent the spread of the virus, and decided that it was about time to move forward. By doing so, and such behavior is more than understandable under these conditions, we all have adapted to the attitude that the Chief Executive himself had already suggested, when the number of deaths was getting closer to the 100 thousands in the beginning of August: "[...] let's keep our lives going on"<sup>19</sup> In addition to this exhausting situation, there is also the fact that television chains have lowered the tone about the deaths by Covid-19, replacing the reports *in loco*, both in hospitals and cemeteries, with the cold presentation of graphs related to the moving average of deaths and contamination rates, presented in a sober and protocol manner. Add to the picture the late arrival of the emergency aid to more than 60 million Brazilians, and we may start to understand why there has been the spread of an artificial atmosphere of normality among Brazilians more recently. In this rather awkward political and social context, it seems that the articulation of those two strategies was well-succeeded in producing the naturalization of the absurd, that is, the trivialization of deaths and the sedimentation of the Brazilian historical cleavages that have long been separating those lives who are deemed worthy from those who are less worthy and from those who are considered to be worthless, the ones



that can thus be thus exposed to the maximum risk of contamination and death.

Finally, let us also think about the possible political effects involved in depriving people from the possibility of mourning the loss of their beloved ones, a more than stressful condition to which we were all subjected to during the pandemic. Estimates from epidemiological studies predict that each death emotionally affects at least up to 6 other people, which can give us an idea of the extent of the national trauma we have been suffering given the extremely high mortality rates from the virus<sup>20</sup>. As Carla Rodrigues pointedly noted when reflecting on the meaning of mourning in the work of Judith Butler (2020), “[...] the right to mourning is also a form of political struggle” (p. 61). If this idea makes sense, and it seems to us that it does, then, perhaps it could be conjectured to what extent does the deprivation of the possibility of grieving relates to our current impossibility to politically fight against the neglect of Bolsonaro’s government during the pandemics, when the lives of us all were explicitly or implicitly considered as disposable and as unworthy of mourning. And let us not forget that in an unequal country like Brazil, this precarious condition has often already been imposed upon large sections of the population even before their birth and death.

The reflection on mourning gains greater development and prominence in Butler’s thinking in connection with her notion about precariousness, formulated in *Precarious Life* (2004a), a work in which Butler reflected about the war against Islamic terrorism carried out by the United States after the attack on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. This dramatic event is at the roots of Butler’s reflections on precariousness, vulnerability and interdependence as conditions intrinsic to human and non-human life on Earth. Thinking about the conditions of precariousness and vulnerability, as well as criticizing socially induced inequalities – those conditions which affect the lives of those who are not covered by social policies and other socio-economic infrastructures, whose lives thus become meaningless and unworthy of mourning –, Butler conferred an ethical-political dimension to grieving. She asked: how does the cleavage between worthy and unworthy lives, between lives deemed worthy of being mourned and those which are not worthy of it, operate “[...] to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?” (Butler, 2004a, p. xiv-xv). Understanding the notion of precariousness both under an ontological-existential key (we are all subjected to violence, aggression, suffering, violence and death), and under a socio-political key (some lives are more subjected to the effects of violence and death produced by social inequalities), Butler considered our ability to watch over and to mourn the death of others as a privileged instance for an ethical-political reflection: in fact, if we do live in a common world in which we all depend on each other, then it is our common duty to fight the spread of violence and social inequalities.

Reflecting on the political aspects of mourning, something needed when her country had just suffered the trauma of international terrorism, Butler proposed an interesting relationship between mourning and the issue of the political community: “Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation, but I think it exposes the constitutive sociality of the self, a basis for thinking a political community of a complex order” (Butler, 2004b, p. 19). Here Butler offers us an extremely important notion to reflect on the political impacts involved in the impossibility of organizing funeral rituals, watching over and mourning our dead collectively. If it makes sense to think that grief reveals not only the crucial dimension of the loss of the other, but also the fact that there are all others who participate in this loss, in addition to all unknown others without which our own life would become unsustainable, impossible, then it might be that the deprivation of the experience of funeral rituals, as well as the deprivation of the possibility of crying collectively for our dead, may have a strong political impact upon a people. In fact, becomes difficult political action under conditions that stress isolation and profound desolation, in the sense of losing touch with oneself and with others? At the same time that the fragility of each one was accentuated to the maximum, making the living conditions of the majority of the population even more unbearable, we were also forbidden to get together, to be together, in joy, rage or sadness in order to fight collectively for better living conditions.

Perhaps such considerations might clarify, at least to a certain point, why did it happen that, the more the number of deaths from the pandemic increased, the more silent and muted the feeling of indignation became in Brazil. In fact, during the pandemic less and less could we find proper ways and channels to publicly manifest our feelings of rage, indignation and disgust. The combination of the strategies of denial of politics and denialism as a policy seem to have spread across the country a mixture of bitter feelings of helplessness and resignation, which were stimulated, from the beginning, by the reiteration of the same icy presidential indifference in relation to the dead and the sufferings of our families: “So what? I am sorry. What do you want me to do?” said the President in April, when the death toll was close to 5,000. It is as if those scandalous presidential statements have now revealed their ultimate goal: to repress and dismiss indignation and organized protest, to make us all acquainted with the naturalization of deaths, to trivialize the losses of so many lives, as well as to silence all those who still remain, inducing all of us to save ourselves individually, while we still can. How long will we endure all this? No one knows, but there can be no intense suffering in silence.

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## Notes

- 1 Cf. Available at: <<https://epoca.globo.com/as-ideias-os-valores-de-bolsonaro-em-100-frases-23353141>>. Accessed on: 23 Sept. 2020.
- 2 Cf. Available at: <<https://www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-em-25-frases-polemicas/>>. Accessed on: 23 Sept. 2020.
- 3 Cf. Available at: <<https://www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-em-25-frases-polemicas/>>. Accessed on: 23 Sept. 2020.
- 4 Cf. Available at: <<https://ultimosegundo.ig.com.br/politica/2019-08-07/declaracoes-polemicas-bolsonaro.html>>. Accessed on: 23 Sept. 2020.
- 5 Cf. Available at: <<https://folhasul.com.br/site/2020/04/19/nos-nao-vamos-negociar-nada-chega-de-patifaria-diz-bolsonaro-em-discurso-a-apoiadores/>>. Accessed on: 23 Sept. 2020.
- 6 Cf. Available at: <<https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/10/09/vice-hamilton-mourao-diz-que-governo-lidou-muito-bem-com-a-pandemia.ghtml>>. Accessed on: 23 Sept. 2020.
- 7 In Brazil, Tatiana Roque has promoted an important discussion about climate denialism in its relation to the rise to power of rulers linked to the extreme right. See her article *O negacionismo no poder*. In *Revista Piauí*, February 2020. More recently, already during the pandemic of the new Coronavirus, she was one of the first theorists to understand Bolsonaro's denialism as a form of government. Cf. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52wP-CPFI0s>>. Accessed on: 23 Sept. 2020.
- 8 Ibope Survey Research from September 24 shows that 40% of the population approves Bolsonaro's government. Cf. Available at: <<https://jovempan.com.br/noticias/brasil/popularidade-jair-bolsonaro-maior-percentual-desde-o-inicio-do-mandato.html>>. Accessed on: 23 Sept. 2020.
- 9 Cf. Roque, Tatiana. *O negacionismo no poder*, op.cit.
- 10 Swako, José. *O que nega o negacionismo?* In *A Terra é Redonda*, 2020. Cf. Available at: <[https://aterraeredonda.com.br/o-que-nega-o-negacionismo/#\\_edn4](https://aterraeredonda.com.br/o-que-nega-o-negacionismo/#_edn4)>. Accessed on: 21 Sept. 2020.
- 11 Giacoia, Oswaldo. *E se o erro, a fabulação, o engano revelarem-se tão essenciais quanto a verdade?* In *Jornal Folha de São Paulo*, Caderno Ilustríssima de 19.02.2017. Cf. Available at: <<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2017/02/1859994-e-se-o-erro-a-fabulacao-o-engano-revelarem-se-tao-essenciais-quanto-a-verdade.shtml>>. Accessed on: 21 Sept. 2020.
- 12 Cf. Available at: <<https://www.aosfatos.org/noticias/bolsonaro-deu-656-declaracoes-falsas-ou-distorcidas-sobre-covid-19-em-seis-meses-de-pandemia/>>. Accessed on: 17 Sept. 2020.
- 13 Cf. Available at: <<https://ultimosegundo.ig.com.br/politica/2020-08-08/veja-cem-momentos-em-que-jair-bolsonaro-minimizou-a-covid-19.html>>. Accessed on: 17 Sept. 2020.
- 14 Cf. Available at: <<https://noticias.uol.com.br/saude/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2020/08/19/bolsonaro-mascara-eficacia.htm>>. Accessed on: 17 Sept. 2020.
- 15 Cf. Available at: <<https://www.correiodopovo.com.br/not%C3%ADcias/pol%C3%ADtica/bolsonaro-diz-que-cloroquina-teria-salvado-vidas-perdidas-na-pandemia-1.469793>>. Accessed on: 17 Sept. 2020.

- 16 Cf. Available at: <<https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2020/09/04/125-mil-mortos-bolsonaro-desestimula-uso-de-mascara-de-protecao-contra-a-covid>>. Accessed on: 17 Sept. 2020.
- 17 Cf. Available at: <<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/equilibrioesaude/2020/10/nao-sera-obrigatoria-esta-vacina-e-ponto-final-afirma-bolsonaro-sobre-coronovac.shtml>>. Accessed on: 21 Sept. 2020.
- 18 Cf. Available at: <[https://noticias.uol.com.br/saude/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2020/10/21/bolsonaro-cancela-acordo-por-coronovac-nao-abro-maoda-minha-autoridade.htm?utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=social-media&utm\\_campaign=noticias&utm\\_content=geral&fbclid=IwAR0ZvwyhP5Nce6dFzPABWNk05JSszGMidFgB49EUxIngdIH7ujZMO0qfYGU](https://noticias.uol.com.br/saude/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2020/10/21/bolsonaro-cancela-acordo-por-coronovac-nao-abro-maoda-minha-autoridade.htm?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social-media&utm_campaign=noticias&utm_content=geral&fbclid=IwAR0ZvwyhP5Nce6dFzPABWNk05JSszGMidFgB49EUxIngdIH7ujZMO0qfYGU)>. Accessed on: 22 Sept. 2020.
- 19 Cf. Available at: <<https://noticias.uol.com.br/saude/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2020/08/06/vamos-chegar-a-100-mil-mortos-mas-vamos-tocar-a-vidadiz-bolsonaro.htm>>. Accessed on: 22 Sept. 2020.
- 20 Cf. Available at: <<https://g1.globo.com/bemestar/coronavirus/noticia/2020/05/01/a-cada-morte-por-coronavirus-seis-a-dez-pessoas-sao-impactadas-pela-dor-do-luto-dizem-especialistas.ghtml>>. Accessed on: 19 Sept. 2020.

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