Programmatic Crisis and Moralization of the Politics: a Proposal to Define the Bolsonarism from the Experience with the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Received: 23 June 2020 / Accepted: 28 August 2020 / Published online: 15 September 2020
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Abstract

The Bolsonaro government and the bolsonarism have undeniable autocratic characteristics and tendencies. However, unlike other authoritarian movements, the authoritarian use of power does not serve the implementation of some project of society based on specific values. It is a “war government.” Its main axis is the “cultural war” itself: the incessant search for enemies, scapegoats, to be fought and eliminated as a method of maintaining power, even if this makes it impossible to build public policies and government as a whole. The article interprets the bolsonarism on the basis of the analysis of social and political conditions that allowed the moralization of politics to become the central axis of the power struggle. The argument is that bolsonarism must be understood as a phenomenon of moralization of politics that exploits power opportunities created by the economic crisis and the programmatic crisis of the political system.

Keywords Bolsonarism · Moralization of politics · Cultural war · Programmatic crisis

Introduction

The Bolsonaro government and the bolsonarism have undeniable autocratic characteristics and tendencies. However, unlike other authoritarian movements, the authoritarian use of power does not serve the implementation of some project of society based on specific values. What defines its authoritarian character is not the attempt to impose a political program by breaking with the electoral, legislative, and constitutional

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procedures, as was the case of the military dictatorship that came to power in 1964. There is no project of society.¹

This is not a state-oriented conservatism, as we know from our military-positivist tradition.² The only goal is the destruction of any opposition that presents itself as an alternative power. The main characteristic of bolsonarism, as a government and as a party, is the incessant practice of defining the other, the opposition, as an enemy to be eliminated morally, and/or physically. It is a “war government.”³ Its main axis is the “cultural war” itself⁴: the incessant search for enemies, scapegoats, to be fought and eliminated as a method of maintaining power, even if this makes it impossible to build public policies and government as a whole. The greatest evidence of this is the recurrent transformation of allies into enemies. The paradigmatic case is former Minister Sérgio Moro. It is a government of “war” not only against political enemies created and recreated by the bolsonarian movement itself but also against institutions and political-institutional arrangements created since the 1988 constitution, also identified with the enemies, such as the established freedom of the press, the university, education, culture, and even the other powers of the republic. The “cultural war” is not a means to a program. It is the program.

There is no line of continuity between the bolsonarism and other authoritarian phenomena in national political history. To interpret the bolsonarism as another expression of a supposed Brazilian singularity is a mistaken starting point.⁵ To understand the phenomenon it is necessary, therefore, to move away from some sociological and historical determinist analyses that ignore the complexity and bifurcations of current Brazilian politics and that appeal exactly to factors such as the authoritarian culture of the Iberian heritage (Schwarcz 2019) or the moral perversions of the legacy of slavery⁶ as satisfactory explanations for the bolsonarism, which is thus reduced to a mere continuity of our authoritarian and unequal past.

No analysis of the present can ignore the past, but for that it is not necessary to succumb to determinism. Our starting point is antideterminist and understands bolsonarism as a phenomenon defined by factors and innovations operating in the present. The past does not determine the phenomenon. It leads to the constraints and structural opportunities from which the phenomenon is constituted and evolves. Even if the “cultural war” mobilizes elements of the military regime, it is defined, as the main axis of the bolsonarism, by radical discontinuity with Brazilian political history. In this sense, we agree with the historian Luiz Felipe de Alencastro: the crystallization of an

¹ Available in <<https://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,programa-politico-nao-ha-a-luta-de-bolsonaro-e-pelo-poder-diz-luiz-wernicke-vianna,70003232820>>, access on May 15, 2020.

² Esta interpretação é de Christian Lynch. Disponível em: <<https://portaldisparada.com.br/politica-e-poder/lynch-video-presidente-bolsonaro/>>. Acesso em 15 de maio de 2020.

³ The term is from Marcos Nobre. Available in <https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/pensar/2020/06/05/interna_pensar,1153859/marcos-nobre-guerra-bolsonaro-nao-coronavirus-e-pelo-poder.shtml>, access on May 15, 2020.

⁴ On the concept of “cultural wars,” see Hunter (2009).

⁵ We find this kind of interpretation in the analyses of historian Lília Schwarcz (available in <<https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-48424619>>, access on May 15, 2020) and the sociologist Jessé Souza (available in <<https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2019/05/08/artigo-or-o-que-significa-bolsonaro-no-poder-por-jesse-souza>>, access on May 15, 2020).

⁶ This is Jesse Souza’s interpretation, which explains the bolsonarism for racism and ancestral class prejudice in Brazil. Available in <https://brasil.elpais.com/opiniao/2020-05-13/o-afeto-racista-como-virtude-no-brasil-de-bolsonaro.html?event_log=fa&o=cerrbr>, access on May 15, 2020.

extreme right-wing electorate around the Bolsonaro is an unprecedented phenomenon not only in Brazilian political history but also in the entire constitutional history of Latin America.⁷ How to explain sociologically the discontinuity and unprecedented nature of bolsoranism?

Our argument is that bolsoranism can only be explained when one takes into account its similarities with other contemporary phenomena of “democratic recession” (Diamond 2015). This explanation understands that threats and processes of socioeconomic decline experienced by middle and popular classes, induced by the closing of economic opportunities capable of guaranteeing a dignified and safe life and by the absence of programmatic responses of the political system to the problem, create opportunities for the moralization of politics that allow struggles between “good” and “evil” to become the main axis of the political-electoral dispute. Although it is necessary to consider the peculiarities of each national case, the experience of the decadence of the middle and popular classes and the programmatic crisis of the political system, incapable of building alternatives for economic opportunities and structures for providing public services in an expanded form of social solidarity, largely explain the opportunities for power exploited by the bolsoranism: The frustration with the (in)existing programmatic alternatives makes it acceptable and attractive, for the social and political majorities, that the problems without solution be interpreted, in the moral register, as the results of the malignant action of the “corrupt,” of the “communists,” and of the “leftists.” Bolsonaro was never the preferred candidate of the economic and financial elites. He became this option because of the strength that came from mobilizing broad middle and popular sectors around his political-moralist movement. His victory is not explained by the action of the dominant elites. The anti-democratic action of these elites is known and has proved successful many times, but not always. Modern autocratic phenomena are not possible without broad social support. “Public opinion” is also important for these phenomena.

The escalation of moral controversies within the political arena has been gaining ground in the last presidential elections (Ramos 2019; Machado 2015). Moral controversies were not absent from the political dispute. However, campaigns for the highest office of the executive (Presidency of the Republic) traditionally did not make these controversies the main axis of the dispute. The election of Jair Bolsonaro and the meteoric rise of the Liberal Social Party (PSL), which jumped from a federal congressman in 2014 to fifty-two federal legislators in 2018, are two events that clearly demarcate a structural change: moral controversy has become the central axis of the dispute for power in the most important positions of our political system. What has changed? What conditions have allowed the moral controversy over people and parties to become the main axis of the national political dispute? How did radical moralization move from the peripheries to the center of the political system?

The article analyses the bolsoranism on the basis of social and political conditions that allowed the moralization of politics to become the central axis of the power struggle. The social and political conditions of the bolsoranism have obvious similarities with those that feed the so-called “democratic recession” and the new “autocratic wave” in several countries. The argument is that bolsoranism must be understood as a

⁷ Available in <<https://quatrocinco.terra.com.br/br/artigos/p/o-que-fazer>>, access on May 15, 2020.

phenomenon of moralization of politics that exploit power opportunities created by the economic crisis and the programmatic crisis of the political system. The thesis is that the moralization of politics results from problems of the political system in its relationship with other spheres of society, particularly with the economy, and whose non-resolution makes the axis of moralization an opportunity for political and electoral mobilization. The production of programmatic alternatives may suffer from structural blockages that threaten the future of democracy. These structural blockages result from relations between politics and other social spheres, especially the most decisive in trajectories of inclusion and exclusion of individuals and collectivities such as the economy. The bolsonarism moralizes the problem of blocking programmatic alternatives, identifying in what it defines as “evil” (corruption, leftist culture) the reasons for the frustrations of the population with the political system. It is a government that bets on the maintenance of permanent discursive and moral confrontation (“cultural war”) as the main tactic of maintenance of power. It worked in the 2018 elections and was functioning in a certain way until the outbreak of the pandemic caused by Covid-19. The tactic depends on “cultural war” being the main axis of the political dispute, at a high level of moralization of the dispute for power, with the struggle between “good” and “evil” codifying the difference between “us” and “them” and shifting the confrontation between political programs focused on economic and social problems to a secondary level.

The relationship between democracy and autocracy

To understand the broader social and political contexts that allowed the moralistic “cultural wars,” which dominated US political debate in the late 1980s (Hunter 2009), to become the main axis of the 2018 elections, and of the Bolsonaro government itself, it is necessary to analyze the dialectic relations between democratic politics and authoritarian politics in contemporary society. As we have seen, it is necessary to move away from the deterministic approach that intends to explain these phenomena from an “original authoritarian sin” that defines our national political trajectory. This deterministic approach induces us to reproduce an etapist view that reduces and idealizes the relationship between democracy and authoritarianism: authoritarian phenomena are seen as “survival of the past in the present,” and modern politics is idealized as if it were exclusively democratic (Ahlers and Stichweh 2019). What is good is attributed to the modern present and what is bad is externalized in time, to the past that insists on survival. Within this framework, Bolsonaro and bolsonarism would be the result of an authoritarian past that still survives.

The deterministic approach and the etapist vision, in spite of being scientifically mistaken, have a lot of explanatory force due to their connection with common sense premises, especially with the derogatory view of society and politics in Brazil that insists on treating general problems of modern democracy as if they were unique to Brazil. We propose an alternative analysis to this “political sociology” that sees the autocratic character of bolsonarism as a result of the singularity of our formation and national trajectory and not as a product of the social and political contradictions of modern democracy itself present in Brazil.

Among these contradictions, the first to be considered is the very coexistence of democracy and autocracy as distinct but equivalent solutions to modern political problems. Our starting point considers modern politics as a global social system (Luhmann 2002), divided internally not only into national states but also into various other arenas and actors, and which oscillates bipolarly between democratic and autocratic alternatives of organization and exercise of power (Ahlers and Stichweh 2019). The trajectory and structures of national politics are important, but their importance cannot be explained by itself. It needs to be considered in a broader and more differentiated context: the global political system. It is not a question of adopting a global causality to explain the national, but of considering the interweaving and coevolution of national trajectories in a world context marked by the circulation, imitation, adaptation and transformation of institutional and cultural models of practicing politics at its various levels.

Alongside the coexistence of democracy and autocracy, we also have the coexistence of constitutional and non-constitutional, legal, and illegal forms of access to and exercise of power as characteristics of the modern political system. Just as it is not fully commanded by the formal institutions of democratic representation, politics is not fully regulated by the constitution and the law, as many idealists imagine it to be in the USA and Europe. Indeed, there may be differences of degree, but not absolute differences between “developed” and “underdeveloped” countries. In both cases, there is always an important part of political activity that takes place outside the constitution and the law. It is politics with its own logic. This “bipolar” conception of modern politics allows us to take a more nuanced look at the processes of democratization or autocratization, of constitutionalization, and of deconstitutionalization. Among the possibilities of removing the label of democratic and placing that of autocratic there is a range of gradations and advances of the autocratic and democratic enclaves. Democracy and autocracy are two “functional equivalentes” that modern politics has at its disposal to carry out the function of building collectively binding decisions. For the argument of this article, the concept of “bipolarity” in modern politics implies that authoritarian phenomena should not be seen as elements of an authoritarian tradition from the past that survives in the present.

Since politics is a global system, differentiated internally in nation-states and at sub-national levels, we need a multi-level analysis that is able to consider the similarities and differences in the relationship between the levels, the unbridgeable oscillations between the two poles of bipolarity between autocracy and democracy, and the inherently autocratic or democratic institutional enclaves within the regimes classified this way or that. It is not a question of refusing to classify countries as authoritarian or democratic, but of perceiving discontinuities between the different levels of the political system (Ahlers and Stichweh 2019, p. 821–822, 833). The objective is to observe differences and similarities at the different levels of the political system and in relation to its forms of political inclusion and exclusion, which can happen in different combinations of participation in the individual and collective *input* of preferences addressed to the political system and in the *output* of goods, services, and sanctions produced by public power. These categories are part of D. Easton’s (1957) conception of the political system, which can be summarized

in the illustration below but can be combined with other approaches that deal with the relationship between politics and society:

These categories articulate the relationship between the political system and society. The *input* (“summary variables” (Easton 1968, p. 155)) is the place of demand, of social groups. The gatekeeper is the place where these demands are filtered and sent to the black box (political system: where the demands are converted and where it is decided politically whether, how, and to what extent they will be considered), and from there return to society (*feedback*) on the form of public policies. Who does this work are institutions (*gatekeepers*) that select, rationalize, and categorize the demands, such as unions, political parties, churches, and neighborhood associations. It is important to stress how these categories are worked out in the different versions of social systems theory, as we can see in the comparison between D. Easton and N. Luhmann. In Easton’s “open systems” theory, this systematization of the demands addressed to the political system happens in the external social environment. In the Luhmannian theory of “operatively closed systems” it happens in the internal social environment of the political system itself: the *input* that Easton categorizes as information that society brings to politics Luhmann treats as information produced within the very operations of the political system, even though its starting point is the periphery of politics. For Luhmann the system does not receive information from the environment. It produces information about the environment internally on the basis of routine observations of its relationship with this environment. The institutions that select, rationalize, and politically categorize social demands, such as social movements, interest groups, or even churches, are part, in Luhmann’s theory, of the periphery of the political system (Luhmann 2002; Saavedra 2020).

Electoral participation (*input*) is fundamental to understanding and defining democracy, but the role of other forms of political inclusion, such as access to public goods and services (*output*), is indispensable to observe the “bipolar” relationship between autocratic politics and democratic politics at different levels. The variation in the way these forms of inclusion (democratic and autocratic, *input*-oriented, or *output*-oriented) are combined makes it possible to compare and differentiate authoritarian political phenomena such as the military regime and bolsionarism without the need for an explanation focused on the national trajectory and on the assumption (which we

consider mistaken) of a “line of continuity” between “vices of origin” and the problems of the present.

At the global level there is no idea of universal inclusion of individuals in a global state simply because there is no such political organization. Everything that modernity has produced in terms of democracy has never reached the global level in institutional terms. The scope was only in semantics with the idea of human rights. Global politics is pre-constitutional and based on the power of transnational organizations and corporations that challenge the public authority of national states. At the subnational levels, it is common for authoritarian regimes, like China, to combine different forms of inclusion and exclusion with the internal hierarchy of state organization and collectively binding decision-making processes. Thus, while the conduct of central government remains inaccessible, local implementation of public policies acquires more openness to the variety of interests and *demands* of the *environment*, promoting distinct forms of participation of the population affected by the results (*output*) of government policies (Ahlers and Stichweh 2019, p. 833).⁸

In this multi-level systemic analysis, the combination of exclusion of the majority of the population from the professional roles of conducting central government and their inclusion in the roles of public policy recipient articulates with patterns of hierarchy between societal values typical of democracies and autocracies. In autocracies, the valorization of the *output* of the political system as a path to individual and collective inclusion predominates. In democracies, by contrast, the value of inclusion through the *input* of the political system predominates; that is, the value of the decision-making and deliberative processes themselves is fixed at the top of the hierarchy. In other words, in democracy, the pattern of values predominates in which politics is evaluated by the values fixed internally by the political system itself (such as the freedoms of opinion and voting) in its collective decision-making procedures, while in autocracies the value of the political process is subjugated to a hierarchy of values outside politics, but which serves as a foundation for elites who control access to positions of power (Ahlers and Stichweh 2019).

Hierarchical setting of values does not precede the political game. It is a product of this game, which oscillates between considering the fixed values as contingent (democracies) or necessary (autocracies), as values inserted in the permanent political process of revision or as values protected from the democratic game by autocratic political action. To value *input* primarily is to value the political system itself, the democratic game taken as an end in itself. To value primarily the *output* is to value the political system as a means to end established from social values external to politics, such as prosperity, moral conservation, the preservation of individuals’ lives, or effectiveness in the implementation of public policies, but which politics accepts as necessary to structure decision-making (Ahlers and Stichweh 2019, p. 824–825).

⁸ Cui Zhiyuan (2009) suggests a multilevel analysis very similar to the Ahlers and Stichweh model. He highlights the need to observe democratic deficits and achievements at the different levels of the Chinese state constitution, and just as Ahlers and Stichweh points to the coexistence of autocracy at the central power level, controlled exclusively by the communist party, with democratic methods of selecting leaders at local levels. These methods have to do especially with the routine institutionalized influence of public opinion polls on the selection of rulers and with administrative inclusion in experiments and economic and social policy.

The two sides of the relationship between the political system and society

The difference between *input* and *output* demarcates two interdependent processes that bind the political system to society (Easton 1953). To understand the oscillations between democracy and autocracy it is necessary to take into account the relationship between the political system and society. Political crises are not only the result of internal processes of politics but of how these processes manage or fail to produce the legitimization of the political system in its relationship with society. Crises can arise on the *input* side when, for example, the public rebels against excluding decision-making processes that become discrepant with regard to the complexity of social *demands* and the conditions for obtaining “mass loyalty” (Offe 1984, p. 53,60). Or they may arise on the *output* side when, for example, the public included in electoral processes is frustrated with public services and the economic results produced by governments (*feedback*). However, on the input or output side, crises tend to affect both sides of the relationship between the political system and society.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, and especially in the first two of the twenty-first century, the rich countries of Europe and North America have experienced crises in legitimizing not only formal representative institutions but also liberal democracy itself as a form of government. Support for democracy showed a clear decline in rich countries and also in middle-income countries like Brazil. In the rich countries, the crisis was characterized (Habermas 1975, p. 92–93; Offe 1984, p. 61) as a growing incompatibility between the logic of legitimization of the welfare state (political system) and the logic of accumulation of the capitalist economic system. In the face of growing pressures and *demands* for public policies on the *input* side, the political system created growing difficulties and limitations to the capital accumulation process and to the profitability of firms. To meet these pressures and demands, the political system needs not only to produce collective decisions in the form of public policies but also to rely on these decisions to produce adequate effects on the social environment, especially the economic system. At first, this is an *output* crisis, produced by the inability of the political system to conduct its relationship with the economic system (Kjaer 2016), both to induce growth and diffusion of productivity gains and to finance social policies through taxation.

This *output* crisis is defined by the interruption of the trajectory of economic development with social inclusion. The political system has not been able to induce new economic processes of productivity gains without pushing back the mechanisms of labor protection, social rights, and political regulation of the economy as a whole. Center-right and center-left parties converged on the attempt to create a “human face” for transnational capitalism, accepting the neo-liberal agenda as a path with no alternative. Over time, this *output* crisis has increased social frustrations, especially of the “losers” of transnational capitalism and the “knowledge economy,” becoming also an *input* crisis that is now evident both in the drastic decrease of support for democracy and in the rise of extreme-right populist movements, parties, and governments.

In Brazil, marked by deep exclusion and social inequality (Dutra 2013), crises have always occurred on both sides of the political system. On the *input* side, the

process of expansion and qualification of political inclusion, especially when it encompasses popular sectors and demands, was repeatedly interrupted by coups d'état and other forms of authoritarianism. On the *output* side, the Brazilian state has suffered and suffers enormous limitations in its capacities to regulate or induce dynamics in the economy, to neutralize the oligarchic private power, and to implement public policies and services. It is important to point out that none of these sources of crisis are unique traits of Brazil. The differences between the problems of democracy here and in rich countries stem from the intensity of the combination of these factors and not from their exclusivity in one case or another. The rise of bolsonarism, for example, is a contingent unfolding of the Brazilian political crisis that articulates elements present in many other contemporary contexts: the programmatic crisis of the political system in representing the demands of social segments that feel unrepresented (*input*) and building alternatives for development and economic opportunities as well as structures for the provision of public services in an expanded form of social solidarity (*output*) explain, to a large extent, both the opportunities for power exploited by bolsonarism and the crisis of democracy in the USA and Europe. National or regional variations exist and are important, but they need to be considered from the overall picture of a dual crisis in liberal democracies.

On the *input* side, most of the middle sectors and an important part of the urban low-income classes have been consolidating, in the succession of democratically elected governments, the perception that their interests, demands, and world views are not represented by the parties that have dominated Brazilian democratic politics since the 1988 constitution: PSDB, PT, and MDB. The rise of religiously oriented political leaders, with their strategies of moralizing politics, was a way to supply the feeling of exclusion of these middle and popular sectors. On the *output* side, it became clear, since the protests of June 2013, that the feeling of “exclusion” did not only affect the existing party and representative system, but also the access to public services and social rights. The political system is capable of coordinating the holding of major events such as the World Cup and the Olympic Games, but it does not deliver education, health, transport, and security in the “Fifa standard.”

In order to understand bolsonarism, as well as other authoritarian phenomena that arise from opportunities generated by the crisis of democracy in other contexts, it is necessary to take into account that although the crisis has two sides, the “supply” side of political and governmental programs capable of contemplating the frustrated expectations (output) is the most decisive. The factors located on the *demand* side (*input*) for populist and authoritarian outputs are of undeniable importance. But they do not determine the emergence and consolidation of extreme-right populist leaders. The crisis in the relationship between society and politics does not have the necessary traces or ramifications. The “supply” side has autonomy and can operate in different directions. In this sense, we propose to define the current crisis which provides an opportunity for bolsonarism as a programmatic crisis that affects both the input side—the relationship between the public and its demands and the representative system formed by the parties and their respective programmatic offerings—and the output side—the provision of public services in the relationship between the administration and the public and economic results.

In order to build and unfold its relations with society both in the aggregation of social demands (*input*) and in the supply of public policies (*output*), the political system must continuously reproduce its function of producing collectively binding decisions. However, to fulfill this function the system needs to rely on diffuse social support, that is, social majorities capable of sustaining the construction of political majorities. The complexity of social relations and the fragmentation of forms of identity make the construction of majorities much more difficult than in the past, when, for example, the place in the productive process strongly guided the formation of collective identities in politics. The construction of any politically relevant collectivity is a mobilization process that is part of the very function of politics in providing the capacity for collectively binding decision-making (Nassehi 2003). Collectivities that underpin collectively binding decisions cannot be seen as a prepolitical social fact. On the contrary, they are a product of the political system, a public that the system builds for itself and before which political activity must always be legitimated (Nassehi 2003, p. 149). Thus, the function of politics is not only the production of collectively binding decisions but also the production of visible and imputable collectivities, which makes possible the binding nature of political decisions.

In a context of growing social and political fragmentation, parties have not been able to offer programs and narratives capable of representing the demands and interests of different social segments around a broader idea of collectivity and a common future. There is a lack of “imagined communities” (Anderson 2006) around programs that point out solutions to the problems of inclusion in the economy and public services. The production of collectivities and collectively binding decisions therefore depends on the sensitivity of the political system to its social environment, especially the responsiveness of politics to problems of exclusion in other systems of society. The welfare state can be defined as inclusion mediator state (Luhmann 2002), which develops the growing commitment of the political system to broaden and intensify political inclusion (citizenship), unfolding it into multiple dimensions (civil, social, economic) that involve inclusion in other social systems such as health, education, economy and family. To play this role, the welfare state uses the mechanisms of money and law, invariably involving economy and law in the process of expanding social inclusion and seeking to influence the decision-making premises of organizations implementing public policies through financial and legal incentives.

The relationship between politics, law, and economics is not characterized by balance and harmony between these interdependent subsystems. Interdependence becomes asymmetrical and has damaged politics and law. The relationship with the economic system has been decisive in blocking the political and legal capacities of welfare states to mediate inclusion in other systems of society. Processes of colonization of politics by the economy also induce the economic colonization of law. The implementation of citizenship rights, especially social rights, depends heavily on the tax and financial instruments of the welfare state. The weakness of these instruments blocks the state’s ability to ensure that organizations that formulate, implement, and evaluate public policies are guided primarily by citizens’ rights and not by the economic sanctions they may suffer or budget limitations that make it impossible to guarantee widespread access to rights.

The monetary dependence of welfare state organizations, which implies a greater influence of economic considerations on the operating possibilities of other systems in society, extends to the organizations of the political-administrative system itself and reduces the scope of collectively binding decisions that could expand the possibilities of organization, development, and inclusion of systems such as education and health care. As is clear from the crises on the *output* side, it is not only about the demand for decommodification measures but also about improving the quality of public services and economic-productive inclusion itself, which involves more than public-funded inclusion: it also involves reprogramming the “services” produced by social systems and transforming and improving the quality of what is produced (economy, education, health, security, transport) and the way it is produced. It is not enough to look only at the *demand* side of inclusion. The influence of the expansion of economic logic on politics also affects the “supply” side, that is, the programming of public administration in its relations with other systems of society, such as the economy, health, and education, in the task of building and implementing public policies capable of contemplating the demands addressed to the system.

The weakness of politics and the welfare state also lies in the fact that the economic colonization of politics narrows the horizon of programmatic orientations (different values, preferences, decision-making premises, priorities) made available both for public choice (*input*) and for the construction of structures in public administration capable of producing the expected results (*output*). The system reacts to financing problems by installing an economic colonization of political programs that ends up restricting enormously the real possibility of political differences being based on differences in economic policy. The production of programmatic differences in relation to the production of collective goals needs to appeal to other dimensions of social life, such as morality and religion.

However, this does not mean that politics has completely lost its autonomy to the logic of economics. Economic practices and structures are not yet capable of producing political decisions with the same legitimacy as politics. Rather, it is a political construction of the non-politicization of certain “economic imperatives,” that is, a kind of “invisible” and cross-party political program that anticipates economic colonization of politics in the form of a “factual restriction” without alternatives. This “invisible program,” which naturalizes the current organizational arrangements and the unequal distribution of non-politicized power, and which is defined by the philosopher Roberto Mangabeira Unger (1999) as a “dictatorship of no alternatives,” does not allow for an expansion of the capacity for inclusion, especially in the economy itself and in politics. Its “political economy” affirms itself as necessary, as a description of reality without alternatives, pretending that the contingency of the organization and structuring of politics and economy become invisible. It is an “invisible program” that blocks the reprogramming of politics and its ability to impact, albeit with unpredictable consequences, on the reprogramming of other spheres of society. This invisible blockage of the contingency of the existing social structures and with it the very capacity for reprogramming politics and other social systems is the main characteristic of what we call a programmatic crisis. In a dynamic society such as ours, reprogramming is a fundamental requirement if the political system is to remain “adapted” to society, that is, capable of processing social demands in the form of public policies. In this sense, bolsonarism is the result of a political system that has not been able to adapt and readapt

to society, and whose decision-making centers responsible for democratic political representation (the parties, parliament, and the executive—black box) are therefore constantly de-legitimized, becoming vulnerable to movements of moralization.

However, the asymmetrical relations between politics and economics, from which phenomena such as the economic colonization of politics and law result, cannot be understood as necessary in social evolution. Even if one can admit that capitalism represents a tendency in this sense, as we can see in the case of neoliberalism, economic colonization should not be understood as a total phenomenon, but rather as something that depends on certain circumstances that the expansion of economic logic can never fully control. In short, the economic colonization of social systems is contingent and the emergence of the welfare state, which in its early stages represented a gigantic transformation of social structures as a requirement for the expansion of inclusion, evidences this.

However, the welfare state has been experiencing a programmatic crisis for some time, resulting from the lack of alternatives for the conduct of economic policy and social inclusion policies as a whole. The parties no longer offer programs that are effectively distinct in terms of the organization and structuring of the economy based on political decisions, seeking in other dimensions of social life topics on which they can develop controversies and lines of action capable of demarcating political differences and winning social support and legitimacy. For the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, this programmatic crisis is a threat to the very future of democracy:

Democracy is normally understood to mean that the choice of a certain political party or coalition involves the decision for a political programme which differs from the programme of other parties. This presupposes a corresponding binary oppositional party programminge.g. conservative/progressive or, since that does not work any more, restrictive/expansive welfare state policies or, if the economy does not permit this, then ecological versus economic preferences. Only in this way can possible directions of the political course be put to choice. The parties, however, seem afraid of the risks involved. (Luhmann 1990, pp. 50-51)

The fear of risks inherent in programmatic construction involves not only the avoidance of political distributive conflicts fundamental to the confrontation of social problems but also the lack of boldness and institutional and intellectual imagination on the part of the established parties in developing programmatic proposals not only to win majorities but also to reorient and potentialize the administrative action of the State in the production of public goods and services. The dominant parties in Brazil after 1988, whether in government or in opposition, reduced their programs to testimony of commitment to values associated with the constitution and neglected the contradictions that need to be faced in an attempt to realize them. They define themselves as social liberal or social democrat, without this implying any contradiction with adherence to prevailing economic imperatives. No one is against “social,” but no one defines what needs to be transformed into reality, who will lose and who will win, so that the interest of the majority in “social” is really a program of government decisions. The commitment to values only attests that society’s problems are taken into account in the communication of politics, but nothing indicates the political-administrative actions

and structures necessary for them to become a priority on the government's agenda. A party program that is exhausted in its commitment to values has not yet said anything about its politics (Luhmann 1977, p. 175). Commitment to values may be the most plausible solution in the search for social (*input*) and electoral support, but the lack of programmatic orientation to produce results (*output*) tends to undermine this initial advantage.

In the next section, we discuss how this programmatic crisis creates opportunities for the moralization of politics to flourish. We seek to demonstrate how this diagnosis on the correlation between programmatic crisis and moralization of politics applies to the Brazilian case, especially in understanding the political centrality acquired by the “cultural wars.”

Programmatic crisis and moralization of politics

Bolsonarism is a phenomenon of political moralization that emerges from the power opportunities created by the programmatic crisis of the political system. Our argument breaks with the methodological nationalism that guides the conception that our problems with democracy arise from a singularly Brazilian authoritarianism, reproduced, for example, in the recent book of Lilia Schwarcz (2019), and starts from the premise that these problems characterize modern politics as a whole. For the argument of this article, the concept of “bipolarity” of modern politics implies that authoritarian phenomena such as the “cultural wars,” religious or otherwise, should not be seen as elements of an authoritarian tradition from the past that survives in the present. Our starting point is that modern politics oscillates, within specific social circumstances, in a bipolar way between democratic and autocratic alternatives of organization and exercise of power.

This “bipolar” conception of modern politics allows us to take a more nuanced look at the processes of democratization or autocratization. Between the possibility of removing the label of democratic and placing the label of autocratic, there is a range of gradations and advances of autocratic or democratic enclaves. The constitutional democratic state itself has many autocratic elements that can be a factor in intimidating democratic procedures. Processes of moralization of politics such as bolsonarism, built on relations with the mass media that largely escape legal and constitutional controls, are an example of this.

But the relationship with the mass media does not create all the conditions for the emergence of the phenomenon. The moralization of politics, to reach the center of the power struggle, needs opportunities that have arisen from the programmatic crisis: the capitulation of parties in offering economic and social policy alternatives. The programmatic crisis in these areas of state action makes politics orphans thematic axes capable of guiding the production of differences, which opens the chance for moral judgments about the global person of candidates and parties, the concentration around behavioral agendas and right-wing and left-wing identity politics, and the demonization of parties and political elites in general, among other examples of the moralization of politics, to become alternative solutions:

As though it were only a question of compensating for this weakness, moral controversy is staged in place of policy controversy. There appears to, be a

political law here: when money as a means of politics grows scarce, morality as a substitute increases. Politicians today typically adopt the line that it is a question of teaching the people who is to be respected and who not-respect or disrespect as a moral sanction applied to the person or the party as a whole.. (Luhmann 1990, p. 51)

In this context, religiously oriented “cultural wars” can serve to build collectivities and pretensions of political representation with a prominent role in contexts of programmatic crisis and fragmentation of conventional social and political majorities.⁹ With the programmatic crisis in politics, especially in the relationship between the public and the parties, the religious moralization of politics can serve as “raw material” for the formation of occasional majorities. Evidence on this type of occasional majority can be found in the survey “Retratos da Sociedade Brasileira—perspectivas para as eleições de 2018” (Portraits of the Brazilian Society—perspectives for the 2018 elections),¹⁰ conducted by the Instituto Brasileiro de Opinião Pública e Estatística (IBOPE).¹¹ According to the survey, 79% of Brazilians agree totally or partially that it is important that the candidate for the presidency of the republic believes in God; 29% declare that it is very important that the candidate is of the same religious denomination as the voter. Jair Bolsonaro, through issues that place moral controversy at the center of the political dispute, has converted religious belonging into a basis for social support. The relationship with religion was already built with statements like this, registered in a rally held in February 2017:

As we are a Christian country, God above all! There's no such thing as a secular state, no. *It's a Christian state!* And whoever's against it, let them change! Let's make Brazil for the majorities. The minorities have to bow to the majorities. *The laws must exist to defend the majorities.* Minorities adapt or simply disappear.¹²

In the interpretation we propose here, the tactic of moralizing the politics of Bolsonaro in relation to the demands (*input*) and, above all, in relation to the symbolic content of religion considers the possibilities of power offered by the structure of the religious field, especially on the socio-cultural profile of Christians. According to the Easton model, the bolsonarism filtered these demands into the *black box* of the political system, returning as an *output* the defense of agendas of the behavioral and moral sphere and thus reinforcing its advantage in mobilizing much of this religious segment, having confession as an important organizational resource.

⁹ Religious modernity does not necessarily mean the confinement of religion to the private sphere, but the opening of a horizon of varied possibilities of organization and practice of the religious (Dutra 2016), among which the modern role of religion in the collective identification of groups and social strata stands out.

¹⁰ Available in <<https://www.portaldaindustria.com.br/estatisticas/rsb-43-perspectivas-para-eleicoes-de-2018/>>, access on January 20, 2020.

¹¹ The research was commissioned by the National Confederation of Industry (NCI). IBOPE interviewed 2 thousand people from 127 municipalities between December 7 and 10, 2017. Available on <<https://www.portaldaindustria.com.br/estatisticas/rsb-43-perspectivas-para-eleicoes-de-2018/>>, access on April 10, 2020.

¹² Available in <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYfjzzWNzZM>>, access on February 29, 2020.

Using Easton's proposal, we can summarize this religious mobilization of bolsonarism as in the chart below:

Input	The evangelical conservative wing can be found in this environment; next to it, its codes, its demands, and its moral values.
Gatekeeper	Our hypothesis is that Bolsonaro has a network that helps him to filter such categories in order to make them a flag and <i>ethos</i> of connection with the conservative evangelical population.
Political system (Black Box)	Environment of decisions, of how to use, publish, and speak, aiming to respond to the demands of part of the evangelical segment capable, even, of reinforcing religious identity and political support.
Feedback	How the actions of the president and his government are interpreted for and by the bolsonarian supporters, that is, how the sense of <i>output</i> is constructed. As an example we can observe the action of the government in the Covid-19 pandemic.

The theme of the Covid-19 pandemic illustrates how bolsonarism reproduces the moralization of politics in the construction of the political meaning of government actions and their *output*. Processes of threat and/or socio-economic decadence create opportunities for the moralization of politics, with which struggles between “good” and “evil” can become the main axis of the political-electoral dispute. Bolsonaro, therefore, lists his main enemies since the beginning of his campaign (communists, LGBTQ+ community, “leftists,” and the like) and highlights a certain public as a priority of his government, which would even be able to help him against the forces of evil and, in a later scenario, Covid-19 itself.¹³

The involvement of religious actors in politics and politicians in religion during the Covid-19 pandemic translated distinct narratives about the role of faith and public power to the public. Whether or not to adopt social isolation in the face of a growing number of deaths? How can the country's economy be rescued by preaching the efficiency of isolation?

In addition to these issues, the collective cult environment has proven to be a space that enhances virus transmission. In Brazil, many churches have closed their doors since March 15 (Sunday), 2020. Social networks and several other online platforms began to serve as a pulpit and opportunities for spreading worship. Pastors who once did not handle such “demonized” instruments now surrendered to technology. In addition to informal gatherings, not a few churches began quarantine awareness campaigns and also appeals to assist brethren of the faith in the face of an economic scenario that is attuned to the pandemic.

Some leaders, especially from the Pentecostal segment, expressed their indignation, after the government's *feedback*, at having to cancel meetings in their churches, since the services are, as Pastor Silas Malafaia said, “therapeutic places” that can help in these moments of the pandemic. In his words: “People are going to die for the coronavirus? Yes. But if there is social chaos, they will die much more.” And he also states that “churches are essential to serve people in despair, distressed, depressed, who will not be served in hospitals.”¹⁴

¹³ Available in <<https://revistaforum.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-leva-pastores-para-orar-por-ele-e-contra-o-coronavirus-no-planalto/>>, access on June 17, 2020.

¹⁴ Available in <<https://odocumento.com.br/bolsonaro-reforca-fim-do-isolamento-social-se-declara-catolico-romano-e-pede-dia-de-jejum-a-o-povo-brasileiro/>>, access on June 17, 2020.

Interpreting the virus as a kind of biblical plague was also part of some of these speeches. Bishop Edir Macedo (Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus) said the virus was a “Satan’s strategy,” but deleted the video after being hospitalized for contracting the virus.¹⁵ The apostle Valdemiro Santiago (Igreja Mundial do Poder de Deus) interpreted it as a kind of “divine vengeance”¹⁶ and announced the sale of bean seeds for a thousand reais promising, from his purchase, the cure of the virus.¹⁷ On March 18, the Evangelical Parliamentary Front released a note advocating the opening of religious temples. The members of this bench invited the faithful to pray against the “evil pandemic.”¹⁸

Both the Bolsonaro and these religious leaders are focused, in one way or another, on the economic issue. On the one hand, the neoliberal policy advocates the reopening of trade and not social isolation; on the other, the theology of positive confession (or prosperity) requires the presence of the faithful to collect tithes and offerings. With the discourses aligned, the scenario has shown us a certain migration of the corona case to the jurisdiction of religion through the call for a fast at the national level.

In a video posted on the twitter of Pastor and Congressman Marco Feliciano, he revealed that he had sent a letter to President Jair Messias Bolsonaro on behalf of several pastors (a kind of *gatekeeper*) to call for fasting and prayer for the nation.¹⁹ On March 2, at the usual meeting with his supporters in the “fence” in front of the Dawn Palace, several pastors also made the suggestion that they might proclaim “a fast for the whole nation.” Another narrative points out the request made by Pastor Willian Ferreira (Assembleia de Deus Ministério Cruzada de Fogo, of Monte Sião-MG) who, on the occasion, requested credit lines for smaller churches. During an interview for the *Jovem Pan* Radio on April 2, the president declared (*feedback*):

I'm Catholic and my wife is an evangelical. It's a request from these people. I'm asking for a fast day for those who have faith. So, we will, soon, with the pastors, priests and religious announce. I am asking for a day of fasting for all the Brazilian people, in the name, of course, that Brazil be free from this evil as soon as possible.²⁰

Reactions contrary to the day of fasting proclaimed by the president were present in the networks, such as that of the Lutheran pastor Romi Márcia Bencke, who is also general secretary of CONIC (National Council of Christian Churches of Brazil):

¹⁵ Available in <<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/colunas/monicabergamo/2020/03/video-mostra-edir-macedo-dizendo-que-coronavirus-e-inofensivo-e-que-satanas-e-midia-promovem-medo.shtml>>, access on June 17, 2020.

¹⁶ Available in <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtQv9HeOucg>>, access on June 17, 2020.

¹⁷ Available in <<https://noticias.uol.com.br/saude/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2020/05/07/pastor-valdemiro-santiago-vende-sementes-prometendo-a-cura-da-covid-19.htm>>, access on June 17, 2020.

¹⁸ Available in <<https://saude.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral/bancada-evangelica-pede-reabertura-de-templos-para-enfrentar-pandemia-maligna,70003238598>>, access on June 17, 2020.

¹⁹ Available in <<https://twitter.com/marcofeliciano/status/983433582487199744>>, access on June 17, 2020.

²⁰ Available in <https://www.correiobraziliense.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2020/04/02/interna_politica,842034/bolsonaro-quer-um-dia-de-jejum-religioso-contra-coronavirus.shtml>, access on June 17, 2020.

[...] the best practice of fasting is care for another. In this little end of Lent, we need to give up individualism and the desire for power. Fasting is not sacrifice, but action in prayer. [...] In a secular state, it is not the role of the president to call for fasting and prayer. The president's task is to follow the Constitution, to put all his energy into resolving this gigantic crisis that is installed in the country together with the other instituted powers.²¹

For Baptist pastor Ed René Kivitz, “Brazil is not a theocratic state. [...] Brazil does not have a king under religious authority, but a democratically elected president. And he criticizes Brazil’s political-religious relationship with Israel: “[...] The Brazilian people are not the people of God and the national territory is not the land of God - the Brazilians are not Israel and the Brazilian territory is not Canaan.”²² For Pastor Arioaldo Ramos, coordinator of the Front of Evangelicals for the Rule of Law, the President’s stance wounds the Constitution on the following points:

1. The president has no authority to call for fasting; 2. the president cannot elect a religion, it is against the secular state; 3. if the president believes the country needs spiritual help he must appeal to all religions, under penalty of practicing religious segregation.²³

In his social network (Facebook), the political scientist Joanildo Burity stated that “this is NOT a call from all Brazilian evangelical leaders. The evangelical name is being roughly appropriated by the pastoral and political RIGHT” (post of April 3, 15h20). And he ends by pointing to the biblical text that emphasizes social justice as the fast proclaimed by post-exilic Isaiah: “Whoever wants to fast, first read the book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 58. The rest is false prophecy. Gross manipulation.”

Several communities/institutions have supported the day of fasting and prayer. In the video published in the networks of evangelical leaders and politicians linked to the government, denominations include Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus, Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, Assembleia de Deus, Igreja Presbiteriana do Brasil, Igreja Batista, Igreja Pentecostal Deus é Amor, Comunidade Cristã Paz e Vida, Paz Church, Igreja Quadrangular, Igreja Batista Getsêmani, Catedral do Avivamento, and Igreja da Restauração, among many others. The figure of the president was associated in the videos and some quoted: “we will obey the call of our presidente.” There is no doubt that this is also a propaganda that seeks to singularize him as the one that called, for the first time in the history of the country, a day of fasting—which had been interpreted by progressive evangelicals as a way to make up the social responsibility of the government.

Therefore, the rite of fasting against Covid-19 demonstrates where these communities are betting their chips on the recognition of magical authority by the president himself. And they seem to bet that from this relationship, they will be able, with freedom, to extinguish any evil from the nation. On the other hand, Bolsonaro intended

²¹ Available in <<https://www.redebrasilatual.com.br/politica/2020/04/pastores-criticam-jejum-convocado-por-bolsonaro-contra-a-covid-19/>>, access on June 17, 2020.

²² Available in <<https://www.diariodocentrodomundo.com.br/brasil-nao-tem-rei-sob-autoridade-religiosa-e-jejum-nacional-nao-e-biblico-por-ed-rene-kivitz/>>, access on June 17, 2020.

²³ Available in <<https://www.instagram.com/ariovaldo/?hl=pt-br>>, access on June 17, 2020.

to overcome the “barriers imposed” (adopting social isolation among other WHO norms, for example) by his own minister of health of yesteryear, since, after fasting, he threatened to fire Luiz Henrique Mandetta (without quoting him) saying that his time would come and that his pen works very well. After saying that, an evangelical leader answered: “Amen.” The resignation occurred on April 16, 2020. At the time, Mandetta’s popularity was 76%, while the president’s rating was 33% (as great or good).²⁴ The tensions generated in the sector caused Nelson Teich, who had held the post later, to resign with 29 days of action. All of this accentuated the economic agenda that Bolsonaro sought to feed with the help of religious.

Covid-19 gave the opportunity for this relationship of executive power with the evangelical churches to be further clarified. The picture in government is filled with evangelicals, some conservatives, and other fundamentalists. Sérgio Moro’s departure from the Ministry of Justice (MJ) on April 24 opened the doors for Calvinist pastor André Mendonça (a “terribly evangelical” minister?). Moro accused Bolsonaro of politically interfering in the Federal Police, subordinated to the MJ. There are six cases involving people close to the president, including his sons Carlos, Flávio, and Eduardo Bolsonaro: (1) CPMI das fake news, (2) fake news survey, (3) investigation of pro-gang acts, (4) Case Queiroz and the Federal Police Superintendence in Rio, (5) Adélio Bispo, and (6) Communications secretary (Fábio Wajngarten). In addition, Bolsonaro’s connections with militias are ventilated and, consequently, with the death of councilwoman Marielle Franco and driver Anderson Gomes. In the same week, Bolsonaro published in his nets an extract from the Epistle to the Hebrews: “Nothing in all creation is hidden from the eyes of God. Everything is discovered and exposed before the eyes of Him to whom we will be accountable.”²⁵ André Mendonça took office on April 29 and, in his speech, promised a technical performance, called himself a “servant” and referred to the president as a “prophet in the fight against crime.” Religious terms help to strengthen the link with the ultraconservative evangelical segment, which, in the context of fragmentation of organized political majorities (parties), fragmentation of public opinion and crisis of governability, can guarantee the “largest of minorities” and even be decisive in elections.

The religious moralization of politics, as we described above in relation to the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, not only fails to compensate for the lack of programmatic alternatives, but also represents an additional threat to democracy: as one of its informal conditions, democracy demands the renunciation of moralizing the political opponent, of not questioning the legitimacy of the opposition and the alternation of power. The processes of moralization feed on the opportunities generated by the programmatic crisis of democracy and aggravate the problem, intensifying the search for authoritarian solutions, since the claim of moral superiority has a constitutive affinity with these solutions. In this respect, bolsonarism is no different from other authoritarian phenomena of the past and the present.

Brazilian politics has been taken by a varied range of moralizing phenomena that feed back into a vicious circle. The antipetisis is perhaps the most prominent, but it should be understood in the context of other similar and complementary phenomena

²⁴ Available in <<https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/04/16/mandetta-anuncia-em-rede-social-que-foi-demitido-do-ministerio-da-saude.ghtml>>, access on June 17, 2020.

²⁵ Available in <<https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1254918143937589253>>, access on June 17, 2020.

that feed it, such as the anti-corruption crusade of lavajazism and the bolsonarian “cultural war.” In general terms, the phenomena of the moralization of politics are characterized by the colonization of politics by the moral code—the binarism good/wrong—that is, by translating problems into collective causes and moral causes: the focus is on accusing people and groups as those responsible for evil and on seeking “anti-system” heroes capable of promoting the victory of the good as the only and invariable solution to all problems (Machado and Miskolci 2019).

For Alberto Guerreiro Ramos (1961), the election of Jânio Quadros in 1960 marked a period of growing programmatic and representative crisis for the political parties of the time (especially PTB, UDN and PSD). The inability of party organizations to include and represent the interests and demands of the middle sectors they had been experiencing since the 1930 revolution created opportunity and a search for “anti-system” leaders and heroes who interpreted the programmatic crisis of politics in terms of moral grammar and promised to solve collective problems by means of crusades against evil. The correlation between programmatic crisis and moralization of politics and the role of the mass media in building public opinion guided by “moral scandals” (Luhmann 1996, p. 61) is present in Guerreiro Ramos explanation.

In our most recent political history, the so-called June 2013 protests may have taken a similar milestone to that analyzed by Guerreiro Ramos: political disputes are increasingly guided by anti-partisan and moralizing rhetoric, with the crusade against corruption being again activated by the mass media to build political public opinion based on the identification of people and groups (parties, especially the PT) defined as corrupt. The structural transformations in the mass media, particularly the rise of “Web 2.0” that made the Internet an environment controlled by “social network corporations” with its intransparent algorithms, potentialized and dynamized the production of moral scandals about the global behavior of people as a central element of the political dispute (Machado and Miskolci 2019, p. 952).

The cause of the fight against corruption, headed by the “Lava-Jato” operation, illustrates how the moralization of politics has a destructive impact on the systemic logic of politics, especially with the moral and legal condemnation of negotiation between parties and politicians, which makes it difficult to form government majorities and aggravates the effects of the programmatic crisis. For Bruno Wanderley Reis (2017), by strongly and uninterruptedly destabilizing the political system, the “Lava-Jato” operation destroys the institutional conditions for an effective fight against corruption, highlighting the inability of moralism as the functional equivalent of programmatic formulation. The intervention that this operation carries out in the political system does not take into account the characteristics of the system that favor the electoral chances of those politicians involved in daring schemes of intransparent financial movement. For Reis, jet washing observes corruption only as a moral problem in the relationship between people, and not as a problem of the rules of financing and the organization of the electoral system as a whole. It destroys formal and informal structures specific to politics, without which the political system itself could not transform itself to effectively tackle corruption: without the stabilization of relationships of trust in the exchange of support and the informal adjustment of interests, the political system cannot link collectively binding decisions with the scope and effectiveness needed for an institutionalized fight against corruption.

The biggest problem is the use of award-winning reporting as a form of critical legal intervention in politics that calls for blind external morality to what politics itself is. It is an intervention guided by an external critique of politics, based on a moral that ignores the logic of political action. By becoming jurisprudence, this morality threatens the very core of political practice, as the award-winning denunciation establishes a high level of mistrust that erodes the differentiation of political power from other resources such as money and physical force concentrated parallel to the state. By corrupting the web of favors and compromises between parties and people, it hinders the separation of criminal networks from peaceful networks of interest, which is a constitutive part of political practice. The result is that all bargaining, all adjustment of interests goes into the shadows, mixing with crime. The award-winning denunciation cannot be applied to the political system, because by undermining necessary structures of the system, it also corrupts the very possibility of building new structures (reprogramming).

This legal moralization promoted by the “Lava-Jato” operation was soon followed and/or succeeded by the religious moralization of public opinion and politics, focused on behavioral issues of gender and sexuality (Machado and Miskolci 2019, p. 956). The religious moralist right did not come out of the closet by chance (Messemberg 2017). It took advantage of the opportunities for fragmented polarization created not only by the structure of Internet 2.0, which favors the constitution and fragmentation of polarized “moral bubbles,” but also by the programmatic crisis of the parties, which find it increasingly difficult to mobilize electoral support based on differences in economic and social policy:

This new right that is articulated after 2013 avoids substantially discussing topics such as economic growth, unemployment, environment, education or health. Instead, it focuses on the spread of fear, resorting to the expedient of creating moral panics - such as the ghost of “gender ideology” or a possible return of “communism”. (Machado and Miskolci 2019, p. 957)

The similarities with non-religious moralization are evident: politics and public debate are transformed into sensationalist polarizations that absolutize the moral code that “divides adversaries into Manichean binaries that easily move from a macrosocial agenda to a focus on the morality or ethics of a group or individual” (Machado and Miskolci 2019, p. 958). The programmatic crisis of the formal decision-making centers of the political system (the parties, the legislature and the executive) creates power opportunities for the religious moralization of politics, especially with the link between religion and the mass media that can function as a resource for the moral punishment of politicians and parties.

Power and limits of bolsonarian cultural war

Bolsonarism and the bolsonarian government are complex phenomena that need to be analyzed from the coming electoral cycles, including to define their social base, which can also vary between middle and popular sectors. Therefore, it is early for any conceptual definition. However, some of its main characteristics have already been evident since the 2018 electoral process, when bolsonarism was victorious, placing the

“cultural war” as the main axis of the dispute. In this text I follow the interpretation of some analysts who understand “cultural war” as the defining characteristic of what bolsonarism has been until now, and I seek to point out (1) specific mobilizing force (society’s *input* into the political system) and the (2) limits of the tactic of moralizing politics for the conduct of government (*output* of the political system to society).

(1) As Marcos Nobre emphasized soon after the 2018 elections,²⁶ the political innovation of Bolsonaro has to be taken into account to analyze and define his movement and government. Instead of a classic electoral machine based on the control of parties and other organizations from the decision-making centers of the political system, Bolsonaro has built a network of political and electoral support based on the constant mobilization of different segments around the “anti-system” struggle, such as subordinate segments of many sectors of society and the state, especially via WhatsApp groups. This tactic is not invention of bolsonarism. There is a *modus operandi* common to the movements and governments of the new global far-right wave, which consists of taking and maintaining the “cultural war” against the “system” to the center of the political dispute and the government itself. This does not mean that the particularities of each country are irrelevant, but only that they are not the starting point. The starting point is contemporary innovation in the field of the extreme right, of which bolsonarism is also the protagonist.

The link with a nationally organized party, such as the Republican party in the USA, imposes constraints on this *modus operandi*, because no one breaks with a classic electoral machine already available without significant damage. This is not precisely the case of Bolsonaro: his moralist mobilization against “the system” is his only great power resource, which makes the “cultural war,” present in other successful phenomena of the extreme right, even more attractive and indispensable. It is not a question of seeking or maintaining social or political majorities, but of constantly mobilizing a minority around one-third of the electorate capable of sustaining the government. In the electoral dispute, a forced expansion of the “cultural war” is sought, producing enough hateful enemies to win the voting majority. In a context of growing social and party fragmentation, the tactic of building and maintaining the “largest of minorities” is a political innovation that makes a difference. As a form of broad political mobilization, bolsonarian “cultural war” is an unparalleled phenomenon in Brazilian and Latin American history.

The mobilization of one-third of the electorate is not made by the announcement that government proposals are being carried out. The mobilization is complementarily detached from programmatic commitment. Its axis is the “cultural war,” the moralistic rhetoric of hatred addressed to enemies constantly redefined by the movement itself and to institutions identified with the “system.” The “cultural war” in particular and the moralization of politics in general can serve as an alternative to the lack of an electoral platform on central problems for the population such as economic stagnation, violence, and the poor quality of public services. In a context of political fragmentation and rejection of parties, “anti-system” moralistic rhetoric can work electorally and even guarantee the maintenance of power based on the constant mobilization of a relatively stable minority. The relative advantage of the “cultural war” is that it helps to mobilize support and thus to react to the programmatic crisis on the *input* side.

²⁶ Available in <<https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/materia/a-revolta-conservadora/>>, access on May 15, 2020.

(2) We fully agree with João César Castro Rocha²⁷ that the “cultural war” is also the axis of the Bolsonaro government itself. The attempt to define the government as composed of different axes (military, economic team, ideological wing, lava system) proved to be flawed, since it did not take into account that the Bolsonaro would impose the “cultural war” as the main orientation, including as a tactic to take the focus off the economic and social problems, to deny political responsibility in relation to them or to conduct the conflicts inherent to our presidentialism.²⁸ It is a government that bets on the maintenance of permanent discursive and moral confrontation as the main tactic of maintaining power. The tactic depends on “cultural war” being the main axis of the political dispute, at a high level of moralization of the dispute for power, with the struggle between “good” and “evil” taking the place of programmatic controversies on social and economic problems.

But there is a fundamental contradiction that involves the “cultural war”: it guarantees the mobilizing force of bolsonarism, contributing to solve problems of social support, but it also makes it impossible for the government to turn to the delivery of economic and social results. The contradiction is that the constant creation of enemies, the main characteristic of the bolsonarism, needed to become the *modus operandi* of the government itself. This is evident in the Covid-19 pandemic: the government invests heavily in the tactics of “cultural war,” spreading the denial of objective data with various conspiracy theories, ranging from the supposed “Chinese communist strategy” around measures of social isolation to the absurd idea that administrative data on contamination, deaths, and occupation of UTI (Intensive Care Unit)²⁹ beds are being inflated by “enemies.” But “cultural war” is not capable of causing disastrous economic and social results to be assimilated as simple “enemy narratives.” Its great disadvantage is that it does not allow for sufficient differentiation of the logic of political mobilization, which guarantees social support, from the governmental and administrative logic of producing and delivering results. It is functional for *input* problems, but dysfunctional for *output* problems: it can produce social support, but it cannot structure decisions capable of producing adequate effects on the social environment. The “cultural war,” by radicalizing the moralization of politics, becomes incapable of differentiating the relationship between political leadership and its basis from the relationship between government and citizens. This is why the most prestigious and important government ministers subordinate the management of their ministries to the constant mobilization tactics of bolsonarism.

Anchored in the success of the formula in the 2018 elections, the government insisted on the tactic, which seemed to be working until the outbreak of the pandemic, which accelerated the contradiction between constant mobilization of supporters (*input*) and government (*output*). The very mobilizing force of the “cultural war” has limits: to lead to the formation of a political majority it depends not only on factors that cannot be replicated, such as the moralistic anti-corruption crusade that reached its peak in 2018

²⁷ Full professor and comparative literature researcher at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Available in <<https://apublica.org/2020/05/quanto-maior-o-colapso-do-governo-maior-a-virulencia-da-guerra-cultural-diz-pesquisador-da-uerj/>>, access on May 15, 2020.

²⁸ Available in <<https://revistaforum.com.br/debates/bolsonaro-e-o-desafio-a-ciencia-politica-por-carlos-savio-teixeira/>>, access on May 15, 2020.

²⁹ Available in <<https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/ansa/2020/06/12/bolsonaro-incentiva-invasao-a-hospitais-para-checar-ocupacao.htm>>, access on May 15, 2020.

and is now in decline, but also on the results that the government is capable of delivering. The outbreak of the pandemic has raised the alarm that the *input* advantage (ensuring the “largest of minorities”) assured by the “cultural war” can be quickly overcome by the *output* disadvantage (poor economic and social results). The pandemic and its devastating effects on society threaten the centrality of the “cultural war” in the political dispute and with it the bolsonarism itself.

There is a clear growth in demand and legitimacy around the welfare state and state intervention in the economy, which can lead to a shift of the “cultural war” from the centre of the political system. It is likely that in the 2022 elections economic and social policy will take the place of the “cultural war” as the main axis of the dispute. Bolsonaro has been trying to treat the pandemic with the “cultural war” method, but it seems that it is becoming more and more difficult to shift the axis of economy and social policy. If the thematic axis of the political dispute changes in this direction and the “cultural war” loses the centrality it has had until now, the left may have an opportunity, if it manages to face the programmatic crisis.

But social and political developments are open and the future undetermined. The “cultural war” government alone cannot guarantee the survival of bolsonarism as a minority of one-third capable of being amplified by the “cultural war” itself and thus guarantee again the electoral success of the president. The pandemic has very quickly aggravated the *output* side of the programmatic crisis of our political system, as the production of economic and social results has become urgent to maintain the support base for the president. Reinventing the government has become a necessity. At the same time that he cannot get rid of the “cultural war” to mobilize his bases, the president realizes that he needs a parliamentary and social³⁰ realignment that cannot be achieved and maintained by the mere moralization of politics, since it depends on economic and social results. It cannot be said that the government is incapable of making this reinvention. Bolsonaro has surprised us enough not to rule out this possibility. What we can say is that the contradiction between the advantages and disadvantages of the “cultural war” had to be faced in this reinvention, because it is not possible to govern with some rationality in the search for results without preventing the mobilization and the “anti-system” moralist discourse from dominating the government itself.

A coup d'état cannot be excluded as an outcome of the worsening of these contradictions. However, if bolsonarism leads a coup, the contradiction already knocks on the door the next day. The construction and legitimization of autocratic regimes is, as we have seen, very dependent on the delivery of results, because it is based on the valorization of the output of the political system. And this is the main weakness of bolsonarism.

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- This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil (CAPES) – Finance Code 001

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