


### **The New Brazilian right and (re)politization of the authoritarian personality: A psychosociological study**

*Nova direita brasileira e (re)politização da personalidade autoritária: Um estudo psicossociológico*

*Nueva derecha brasileña y (re)politicación de la personalidad autoritaria: Un estudio psicossociológico*

*La nouvelle droite brésilienne et la (re)politisation de la personnalité autoritaire : Une étude psychosociologique*

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**Raphael Santos das Mercês**  

Mestre em Psicologia pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia (PPGP) do Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas (IFCH) da Universidade Federal do Pará (UFPA), na Linha de Pesquisa: Psicanálise - Teoria e Clínica. Graduado em Psicologia pela mesma instituição.

**Mauricio Souza**  

Psicólogo (1999), Mestre em Antropologia Social (2002) e Doutor em Psicologia (2007), com estágio de Pós-Doutorado em Teoria Psicanalítica (2011). Atua como Professor Associado IV junto ao Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas da Universidade Federal do Pará (Faculdade de Psicologia e Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia).

#### Resumo

Na pesquisa que deu origem a este artigo buscamos discernir e analisar os regimes de identificação presentes em parte da nova direita política brasileira, a fim de debater as atribuições de fascismo que a ela têm sido direcionadas no debate público. Para tanto, além de um levantamento teórico-bibliográfico acerca das temáticas da psicologia das massas e da personalidade autoritária inspirado nas ideias de Freud e Adorno, utilizamo-nos do *lurking*, técnica de coleta de dados associada à netnografia, para acompanhar com regularidade as interações no campo de comentários da página de Facebook do Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL) para, em seguida, proceder à análise de seu conteúdo. Em termos conclusivos, corroboramos a tese de que a noção de fascismo, considerando-se a atualização do debate acadêmico sobre o tópico, serve como categoria analítica capaz de dar conta das tendências sociais supramencionadas e defendemos que o que vem sucedendo na atualidade política nacional pode ser lido como a (re)politização de uma personalidade autoritária preexistente, aqui compreendida como sistema ideológico e psicológico profundamente vinculado ao desenvolvimento das sociedades capitalistas modernas, constitutivamente inclinadas ao preconceito, à discriminação e à dominação.

**Palavras-chave:** nova direita, redes sociais, psicanálise, teoria crítica

#### Abstract

*In the research that led to this article we pursued to identify and analyse the regimes of identification present in part of Brazilian new political right to discuss the accusations of fascism that have been assigned to it. For this purpose, besides a theoretical and bibliographical survey about the topics of mass psychology and authoritarian personality inspired by Freud and Adorno's ideas, we carried out the lurking procedure, a technique of data collection associated to netnography. So, we regularly followed the interactions in the comments box of the Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL) Facebook page, to finally proceed with the content analysis. In conclusive terms, we validate the notion of fascism as an analytical category possible to apply to the abovementioned social tendencies, and we defend that what has been happening in nowadays national politics may be read as the (re)politicization of a pre-existing authoritarian personality understood*

here as an ideological and psychological system deeply bound to the development of modern capitalist societies, constitutively inclined to prejudice, discrimination and domination.

**Keywords:** new right, social network, psychoanalysis, critical theory

### **Resumen**

*En la investigación que dio origen a este artículo buscamos identificar y analizar las formas de identificación presentes en parte de la nueva derecha política brasileña con el fin de debatir las atribuciones de fascismo que a ella han sido hechas. Para eso, además de una búsqueda teórica y bibliográfica acerca de los temas de la psicología de las masas y la personalidad autoritaria inspirado en las ideas de Freud y Adorno, nos valemos del lurking, técnica de coleta de datos asociada a la netnografía, acompañando con regularidad las interacciones en el cuadro de comentarios de la página en el Facebook del Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL), para después proceder al análisis del contenido. En términos conclusivos, validamos la noción de fascismo como categoría analítica capaz de darse cuenta de las tendencias sociales mencionadas, y defendemos que lo que ha ocurrido en la actualidad de la política nacional puede leerse como la (re)politización de una personalidad autoritaria previamente existente, comprendida aquí como un sistema ideológico y psicológico profundamente vinculado a la historia de las sociedades capitalistas modernas, constitutivamente dispuestas al prejuicio, discriminación y dominación.*

**Palabras clave:** nueva derecha, redes sociales, psicoanálisis, teoría crítica

### **Résumé**

*Dans la recherche qui a conduit à cet article, nous visons à identifier et à analyser les régimes d'identification dans une partie de la nouvelle droite politique brésilienne, afin de discuter des attributions du fascisme qui lui ont été faites. Ainsi, en plus d'une enquête théorico-bibliographique sur les thèmes de la psychologie de masse et de la personnalité autoritaire inspirée par les idées de Freud et d'Adorno, nous avons utilisé le « lurking », une technique de collecte de données associée à la netnographie, en surveillant régulièrement les interactions dans les commentaires de la page Facebook nommée « Movimento Brasil Livre-MBL », pour ensuite procéder à l'analyse de son contenu. En conclusion, nous validons la notion de fascisme comme une catégorie analytique capable d'expliquer les tendances sociales susmentionnées. Nous soutenons également que la politique nationale actuelle peut être interprétée comme la (re)politisation d'une personnalité autoritaire préexistante, entendue ici comme un système idéologique et psychologique profondément lié au développement des sociétés capitalistes modernes, et donc constitutivement enclin aux préjugés, à la discrimination et à la domination.*

**Mots-clés :** nouvelle droite ; réseaux sociaux ; psychanalyse ; théorie critique.

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As several authors have observed, the last decade has been marked by a comprehensive crisis in liberal democracies, with right-wing radicalism proliferating in various parts of the world and once again taking on a disruptive character (Brown, 2018; Gandesha, 2018, 2020; Safatle, 2023). Whether in the public sphere or in the more intimate and family forum, this process has led to a deep division in the social fabric, subjecting subjects to a recurring confrontation with the political dimension immanent to culture.

In Brazil, there has been a radical rupture in the configuration of the political fabric as it had been structured since redemocratization; a rupture which, Abranches (2019) points out, can be understood in two senses. Firstly, in terms of the main forces currently vying for governance of the country, with the obfuscation of political parties and figures representing the traditional right and the concomitant rise of a new right, more radical and more active on the streets and in computer-mediated communication, a right that, over time, has come to be represented above all by so-called Bolsonarism. Secondly, this rupture is expressed in the extremist agendas promoted by the movement and others associated with it, which imply - implicitly or explicitly - on the one hand a desire for institutional subversion and, on the other, a clear sympathy for authoritarian regimes of a fascist nature.

In fact, both in the academic context *stricto sensu* and in public opinion in general, much has been debated about this issue, that is, about the fascist, populist or authoritarian element involved in the socio-political movement, whose manifestations affect both institutions and subjectivities. In the latter sense, in line with social trends, and especially on social media platforms, a certain way of identifying oneself as a subject belonging to a group and dealing with differences seems to have gained prominence, very close to the analysis made by Freud (1921/2020b) about the narcissistic masses of his time, and by Adorno (2015b) when he associated them with the emergence of fascism.

It was therefore in view of the danger to Brazilian democracy represented by this social tendency and identificatory modalities that, in the course of the research that gave rise to this article (carried out between September 2018 and July 2019, at a time when the extreme national right represented by Bolsonaro was on the rise), we took up elements of Freud's approach to the problem of the masses; to which we added adjustments stemming from the critical appropriation later made by Adorno (2015b), in order to investigate the apparent presence in Brazil's current politics of libidinal structures and propaganda devices similar to those once associated with the European fascist hordes of the first decades of the last century. More specifically, we start from the hypothesis that the political polarization thesis implies that various aspects of the narcissistic and fascist masses described by Freud (1921/2020b) and Adorno (2015b) could be found today in the forms of online sociability, especially on social media platforms such as Facebook (Dunker, 2019).

As for the material evaluated for this purpose, we extracted it by regularly monitoring the interactions that took place in the comments sections of a Facebook page, specifically the page belonging to the Free Brazil Movement (MBL). This choice of object is justified by the fact that, although there are other groups that have embodied the rise of the so-called *new right* in Brazil (Andrade, 2018), the MBL stood out for the notoriety it achieved during the demonstrations in favor of the *impeachment* of President Dilma Rousseff, from late 2014 until its outcome two years later. In that period, through the massive use of communication via social media platforms, MBL gathered around itself an expressive number of followers. At the time of this research there were more than three million, promoting intense online political activity with reverberations in voluminous street demonstrations across the country.

Subsequently, our initial observation unfolded into several other questions. The first of these can be read as follows: to what extent are we dealing with an updating of identification structures typical of the classic fascist masses, and to what extent are we dealing with a new phenomenon? Secondly: once this has been verified, what is the specificity of this updating in the Brazilian context? And more: what distortions do local historical and cultural conditions inflict on the structure of fascist paranoia and what content does it mobilize in this context? Finally, how does this update relate to recent developments in computer-mediated communication and their impact on the political and economic spheres? Of course, these are questions whose breadth could never be covered in the limited space of an article. For this reason, we will limit ourselves here to the first of them, leaving the others for possible future elaborations.

Finally, this article is divided into four parts. In the first, we provide a theoretical overview of the research that gave rise to it, as well as delving into certain issues relating to the context in which it was prepared and carried out. In the second, we discuss our methodological approach. In the third part, we present and discuss the results. Finally, in the fourth and last part, we provide a general summary of our findings and interpretations so far, as well as a set of questions that came to light during this work and which will remain open as invitations for future research.

### **Some theoretical and contextual notes: The new Brazilian right, the Free Brazil Movement and the Adornian notion of authoritarian personality**

As we pointed out earlier, over the last few years it has been possible to observe a rapid escalation of authoritarian tendencies in various parts of the world, including Brazil (Castro et al., 2020). Represented above all by the far right, these tendencies have broken the circle of individual demonstrations or those linked to small marginal groups of supremacists with authoritarian tendencies with fascist leanings. They now mobilize, directly or indirectly, a considerable contingent of the population and leverage their most exceptional characters into positions of notable relevance in state management, thereby setting an important part of public agendas and debate.

With its inflammatory rhetoric, the far right has reconfigured the political spectrum, superimposing on its complexity a dichotomous phantasmagoria that restores the anxieties and devices of a past that was until recently considered obsolete (Alonso, 2019). This is how, for example, the threatening figure of the "communist", a recurring image in Latin American authoritarian delirium, reappears today (Miguel, 2019). This is all despite the real conditions of left-wing movements such as those in Brazil, which, in general, are closer to social democracy or social liberalism, and continue to be the targets of projection and attacks from the radicalism of this insurgent right.

Staying on the national scene, we can place the 2013 demonstrations as a turning point and the moment when, after being defeated in the 2014 presidential election by Dilma Rousseff (PT), Aécio Neves (PSDB) questioned the result of the polls (Matais, 2014; Passarinho, 2014), instrumentalizing a popular indignation that was then diffuse, but had been preconditioned long before by the mainstream media's treatment of the recurring problem of corruption in Brazil. In this turbulent period, a new phase of the right began to emerge, characterized by the anti-PET-anti-corruption agenda and the occupation of the streets, with strong expressiveness in computer-mediated communications. A right wing whose unifying principle, it is worth remembering, was largely the impetus to remove a democratically elected president from power, taking advantage of what has come to be referred to as the political dimension of *impeachment*.

As well as aligning itself with global trends, mirroring certain consequences of contemporary world economic policy (Brown, 2018; Estefanía, 2019; Gandesha, 2018; Solano, 2019), the Brazilian far right also stood out for expressing more

freely what was true at the core of the popular mobilization described above: resentment and contempt for symbolic mediations, especially when they lent themselves to being more than a façade for the maintenance of privileges and domination of certain sectors of society over others, according to the model structured by the historical and institutional beacons of Brazilian authoritarianism (Almeida, 2019a, 2019b; Casara, 2019; Schwarcz, 2019; Teles, 2019).

Not surprisingly, many of the representative figures of the new phase of the national liberal right, as the MBL calls itself, were in principle involved with the rise of former president Jair Bolsonaro, supporting him or even forming his government, regardless of his openly anti-democratic aspirations and opposition to maintaining dignity and advancing rights for various historically oppressed and exploited groups, such as women, blacks, indigenous peoples and the LGBTQIA+ community. Sectors of both the traditional right and the allegedly democratic new right have been affected by the reconfiguration of the political space.

The MBL's lineage, it should be remembered, goes back to the *Atlas Network*, a *meta-Think Tank*<sup>1</sup> responsible for funding and promoting ultra-right-wing agendas in Latin America and other regions of the world (Baggio, 2016). In this way, it can be said that their ability to mobilize is not anchored in absolute spontaneity, as if the masses were essentially programmed to follow them. It is a much more complex process involving a certain predisposition to authoritarianism, as mentioned above, but also calculation, communication procedures and propaganda. The appeal of the authoritarian right, with the support of so-called non-authoritarian sectors such as the MBL, used the climate of popular dissatisfaction and the enthusiasm of the conventional media in fostering the imagery of a country in ruins and given over to corruption, corruption reduced to the public sector and to a single party, to undertake its escalation in the midst of chaos, profoundly influencing the national political scene and electing its members in the subsequent elections and, on the other hand, the latent authoritarian condition in the Brazilian people.

There are different ways of understanding this dissatisfaction. For Dunker (2019, p. 122), for example, every time we approach our ideals, we have to “experience mourning and leave behind a way of life that has been overcome” and, on the other hand, also “accommodate our aspirations of desire to a new scenario”. This would be the situation of the Brazilian population after the expansion of the democratic experience provided by Lulism. Social mobility, in this sense, would also generate tensions with the privileged classes, who feel the inclusion of others as a narcissistic loss. In addition, one can also evoke the feeling of dissatisfaction generated by the consolidation of neoliberal reason at a global level (Brown, 2018; Dardot & Laval, 2016; Gandesha, 2018) and, in Brazil in particular, with the degradation of the conditions that maintained the cohesion of Lula's support base, from the internal bourgeoisie to the most marginal classes of workers (Hermida & Lira, 2018). In any case, whether in terms of a crisis of growing expectations or identity conflicts linked to the dimension of recognition, or due to the impoverishment resulting from the management of the crisis under neoliberal capitalism, it is a fact that there is a certain amount of dissatisfaction around the world that has been instrumentalized by authoritarian movements (Solano, 2019).

It is a fact that the MBL does not display an anti-democratic façade. On the contrary, the group presents itself as a component of a rational right, claiming to oppose left-wing ideologies culturally and intellectually, but mobilizing those same ideologues of neoliberalism who recognized in fascist dictatorships a kind of immune defense of capitalism to social transformation mobilized in the struggle for rights and emancipation (Dardot & Laval, 2016). This is, therefore, one of the reasons why we have selected precisely this group for our study, because like Adorno (2019), in his research on the authoritarian personality, our interest is oriented less towards those groups and subjects ostensibly linked to authoritarianism and much more towards those who maintain it as a mere potential, as a latent factor, which is not immediately visible - given that our thesis implies recognizing the subtle and pervasive nature of the authoritarian germ in Brazilian society. This also outlines the problem of the relationship between neoliberalism and authoritarianism (Brown, 2018; Gandesha, 2018). It should be noted, as it will become clearer in the next section, that our focus is not on MBL's communication itself, which remains in the background, requiring further research, but on the interactions of those who engage in such communications.

Given this situation, the question we have in mind is: how can we understand the decision, widely taken by both the traditional Brazilian right and citizens who claim to be apolitical or indifferent, to tolerate (and even encourage) authoritarian tendencies, thereby giving shelter to fascist discourses and mobilizations full of prejudice and destructive impulses? We argue that a movement of this nature can also be investigated through its psychological dimension, and this is what we will focus on from now on. In other words, we will address the subjective mark of social coercion or, in Freudian terms, the zone of conflict between the drive as an almost unlimited potential for realizing forms of life and the impositions of culture, characterized by a series of mandatory renunciations (Freud, 1905/2016, 1930/2020a), and how this complex is linked to the constitution of the foundations of authoritarian movements with fascist leanings (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1985; Adorno, 2015b).

<sup>1</sup> This is an American *think tank* that organizes and promotes the activity of other *think tanks* associated with the defense and dissemination of neoliberal agendas. These are institutions that bridge the gap between academic/scientific knowledge and public policy. For more information, see Araldi (2021).

To this end, we will follow in the footsteps of an analytically oriented social psychology, especially with regard to Adorno's elaborations in this regard, which start from the observation that the psyche behaves, at least in part, as a superstructure, and should not be apprehended as a primordial element, but always in a dialectical relationship with objective social processes (Adorno, 2015a)<sup>2</sup>. In these terms, we can broadly say that in capitalist culture, formative dynamics operate in such a way that the possibilities for subjects to exercise autonomy become increasingly narrow, suppressed as they are by the weight of the need to conform to super-powerful institutions (Adorno, 2015b). In fact, turning to the question of the subject implies reflecting on their formative process and, in equal measure, on the procedures for directing them towards greater emancipation, which also results in a collective transformation.

In other words, it's a question of thinking through the fragment, here represented by the subject in relation to society. It is in this direction that it is worth highlighting the value of *Studies on the Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, 2019) as a very representative text of this approach. In it, as the title suggests, the concept of the authoritarian personality is developed in its capacity as: "(...) a link between psychological dispositions and political inclinations" (Adorno, 2019, p. 30). This approach also takes place through the handling of a delicate materialist dialectic of the dichotomous principles that conceptually translate the dynamics of society: subject and object, individual and group, particular and universal, etc., such typifications being a fact that should itself be assumed to be conditioned by the circumstances of each historical moment.

In this sense, Adorno (2019) states that: "The reason for the plausibility of the typological approach (...) is not biological-static, but just the opposite: dynamic and social." Given this, the idea of personality developed here, a construct relating to that zone of conflict in which subjects are constituted, implies that: "The marks of social repression are left on the individual soul" (Adorno, 2019, p. 521), on the assumption that that historical time supported the emergence of an anthropological type with new and quite specific characteristics. Namely, a potentially authoritarian type which, unlike the old fanatic, combines ideas and practices typical of industrialized societies with irrational and anti-rational conceptions. The very possibility of working with typologies implies the historical circumstances in which subjectivation results in rigid and stereotyped procedures, performed in the relationship with a powerful leader, the community of equals, his followers, and the otherness against which narcissism is inflamed (Freud, 1921/2020b).

This article recognizes the criticisms that currently fall on the use of the concept of authoritarian personality, but, like Gandesha (2018), it does not completely discard it. As long as we adjust the role of the psychoanalytic foundation and the transformations imposed by the neoliberal context in relation to state capitalism, it is argued here that this concept can still provide explanatory value, considering the re-emergence of the extreme right as a global political force. The authoritarian personality is, roughly speaking, nothing more than the stereotypical attitude fostered by commodified culture and propaganda (Adorno, 2019; Duarte, 2010). Thus, it has been able to remain in liberal democracies, from the post-war period to the present day, apart from its immediate political content (Adorno, 2020).

### **Researching on a social media platform: *Lurking*, content analysis and epistemological issues**

For the process of observing the interactions that took place on the MBL's Facebook page, as we said earlier, our privileged object of study here, we used a methodology inspired by the techniques of online ethnography or netnography as described by Kozinets (2010). Roughly speaking, this type of research consists of a set of procedures aimed at studying technically mediated communication. Its tools can be mixed with various others, such as interviews, discourse analysis, the use of textual mapping tools, etc. It is therefore a very flexible approach, designed to provide a detailed representation of the experiences lived online by members of specific groups.

In the case of this research, we were unable to carry out all the steps involved in a proper netnography, since a truly participant observation of the activities of the website studied seemed to us to be inappropriate, considering the complete ideological disparity between the researchers' intentions and the most expressive cross-section of the group's members, which, added to the atmosphere of notorious animosity towards differences, could expose us to certain constraints and make it difficult to conduct the research. It could be argued that these very differences would have enriched the data of our investigation, and, in fact, we don't disagree. However, we concluded that, as observers, it would be possible to collect the general data we needed without running the risk of compromising access to the page thanks to any problematic interactions, since, according to Facebook's rules, the MBL page's management team would have the right to simply disable access to it at any time.

Despite criticisms of a more passive or observational form of netnography, the fact is that several studies have been effectively carried out according to this model. This is pointed out, for example, by Kozinets et al. (2014) and Costello et al. (2017), who call this practice *lurking*, recognizing its validity in certain contexts and even recommending it to obtain historical information, social structure, rituals and identificatory movements, and it is precisely the latter that we are interested in here. We would add that it is possible to value the discreet and less intrusive nature of this approach, which brings with it the benefit

<sup>2</sup> An example of this type of connection between social tendencies and libidinal structures can be found in the correspondences that Freud (1913/2013) points out between social institutions and psychic structures.

of generally producing less interference in the phenomenon studied, as expressed by Beaulieu (2004) and Kozinets (2010). We therefore worked with two types of data: archival, public data resulting from interactions between group members and users who came to take part in discussions on the page, and reflective data, i.e. our own field notes (Silva, 2015).

An interesting aspect of conducting this fieldwork that is worth mentioning concerns how, due to the peculiarity of the digital environment, the researchers' immersion in the object of study provided access to a unique experience. It can be described as follows: the more we consumed content produced and broadcast in the right-wing and far-right bubbles, the more the Facebook algorithm began to question us as if we belonged to these groups. This established a constant dialog with the machine where it was no longer necessary to search for posts and comments from members of those communities, since the algorithmic profiling often tried to bring them to us, even arousing a curiosity that became a habit, a habit that can be translated into the question: what are they talking about now? As the research took place using electronic devices and accounts on social media platforms that we also use daily, our experience with these platforms ended up blending into the research work.

The selection we made of the material found in the comments sections of the posts on the MBL page was based on the parameters we were able to establish on the basis of our bibliographic survey. In other words: based on information obtained through previous research, especially those linked to the tradition of *critical social theory* studies regarding the relationship between subjectivity and authoritarian social movements (Adorno, 2015b; 2019). In this vein, while paying attention to the content of the interactions that could provide *insights* into the libidinal structure in force in the group, its identificatory regimes and representation of difference and authority, as well as its moral and aesthetic ideals, we began to draw some connections between the fragment and the totality. In other words, between the seemingly trivial act of picking up a *smartphone* and checking social networks and the troubled social and political processes that Brazil and the world were going through, with the rise of a radical political right wing full of intolerance, obscurantism and prejudice.

We emphasize that this study presented a necessary conjunction between theory and empirics and that both, as expected, ended up interpenetrating each other. In this sense, the very definition of our research problem depended on a certain theoretical advance in various fields, especially psychoanalysis and social theory. Thus, recognizing the truth content of Freudian typifications, at least in the way they were recovered by Adorno on several occasions, does not imply their unmediated transposition to the present day, since they are also linked to specific historical contexts. This is the epistemological direction that has guided our steps here, without neglecting the need for any resizing in terms of content or even structure.

In the same way, we tried to use collection and analysis tools that would enable a dynamic approach to the object we chose, in this case, the MBL's Facebook page, and that were consistent with the updating of the media we had at our disposal, which also changes in line with the transformations of society itself. Based on this notion, we don't think it's right to say, for example, that the specific cut-outs we made of posts and comment boxes represent, by themselves and each time, a totally legitimate sample of social differences. This is also because we must remember that there is a dialectic between the algorithm and desire and that society is not reduced to expressions of online sociability. In fact, comment boxes hosted in specific spaces on the web lose much of their informative value if they don't report on all the social trends that transcend them, even though they are more or less represented in them.

### **Results (or the politicization of the authoritarian personality and its regime of identifications: On the reawakening of fascism in Brazil)**

According to Freud's classic definition (1921/2020b), a mass can be read as a group of subjects who have instituted the same object in place of their *ideal of the self*, thus identifying with each other in their *self*. The essence of Freud's formulation lies in the recognition of a libidinal structure that presented itself as an alternative to the current explanations of his time, where scholars of crowds defended the action of mental suggestion or specialized and primordial instincts, sometimes modulated by a soul anchored in racial theories, as causes for the behaviors of the various human groupings (see, for example, the ideas of Le Bon, 2008). In contrast, in Freud's reading, it is love, the soul side of libido, which is the foundation of mass organization.

Despite delving more deeply into certain types of mass than others, the libidinal structure described by Freud (1921/2020b) includes a variety of potential assemblages, and the author, on more than one occasion, drew attention to other possibilities in terms of the configuration of group dynamics: "We should pay attention to the masses of different kinds, more or less stable, which are produced spontaneously, and study the conditions of their origin and disintegration" (Freud, 1921/2020b, p. 173). The author goes on to present some important developments in this discussion around the emphasis on the masses having or not having leaders. He does this by asking questions such as: Are masses with a leader primordial in relation to the others? How is a mass born and how does it die? What is the relationship between the leader and the guiding idea(s) of the mass? Can both be negative? He also points to the fact that in complex modern societies everyone sees themselves as part of many masses, either interspersed or simultaneously. None of this, however, takes him away from his goal of investigating the "fundamental psychological problems" that arise "in the structure of a mass", taking up and deepening the core thesis of "libido connections" (Freud, 1921/2020b, p. 173).

It is worth adding that, in Adorno's (2015b) reading of this debate, Freud's emphasis on narcissistic masses and their relationship with their leaders was what consecrated his sensitivity to the historical conditions of an era in which the rise of the fascist masses in Europe was anticipated. In other words, Freud would have been able to grasp the repercussions of social phenomena such as fascism in terms of individual and collective identificatory regimes. The importance of observing the continuation of such libidinal structures today lies in the fact that, as predicted by Adorno (2015a), the defeat of Nazi-fascist political regimes such as those of Hitler and Mussolini did not mean the end of the fascist *modus operandi* itself, which remained latent in the processes of subjectivity production under late capitalism through the efficacy of industrialized culture and its schematisms (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1985; Adorno, 2020).

As for the case selected for study here, the MBL Facebook page, although it is possible to identify the basic libidinal structure with some ease, the complexity of mass formation was also evident, as the subjects whose online interactions we followed were not linked but always had one and the same element as a mediator. In fact, it was possible to see in their speeches a whole constellation of different elements, characters, ideals and values, so that the MBL and its page could be understood as representatives of a space for agglutinating and strengthening cooperative relationships between dynamic and fragmented masses in which the main leaders of one could be the secondary leaders of another or, as we witnessed, quickly become enemies (the "communists"). So, although the members of that collectivity were united by the backdrop of a common idea, the broad identification with the right against corruption represented by the Brazilian left, if the principle of reality brought them into collision, they would break up into smaller units, marked by those beacons based on love for specific objects.

As we have seen, mass formation implies a procedure of mutual equivalence between the *selves* that make it up, a process that implies the suspension of the narcissism of small differences. In other words, an equalization that doesn't take place without the proper displacement of the affections of hatred towards other objects, thus fixed as external. In these terms, when we considered the themes most frequently raised in the comments and discussions we evaluated, whether by members of the MBL page among themselves or with some exogenous interlocutor, we could see in them the omnipresence of an opposition that divided the country into two broad categories: "good citizens" and "bad Brazilians", explicitly reflecting the binarism described by Adorno (2015b) in relation to the ideological-psychological system underlying the fascist masses. This means that, in this particular group, social polarization reverberated in the subjective sphere. This binarism, in addition to the Adornian indications regarding the dynamics of the *in-group* and *out-group*, has also been pointed out by Alonso (2019) and several other authors.

In fact, the first category, sustained in continuous articulation with the idea of a "we" and referring to all that is positively valued, would be responsible for an organizational task to purify the nation, as the comment suggests: "*The moment is for the good people to unite and mobilize (...) The bad Brazilians insist on destroying the country. Let's take to the streets and show that the people united will never be defeated*". In a later call, this same division is also evident: "*On June 30, MBL, Let's take to the streets and gather the good people together for a better Brazil*". Thus, imbued with so many certainties as to the place they occupied, users identified with the group also always seemed to be able to immediately distinguish their own. This is what we see in the following post by a user about the leaked dialogues between then-judge Sérgio Moro and prosecutor Deltan Dallagnol, dialogues that called into question the impartiality of *Operation Car Wash*<sup>3</sup> and which more recently culminated in the annulment of a large number of decisions made in this area: "*These are attitudes of good people*". In the same vein, in a constant reiteration of the links that would maintain their unity, the page's regulars used to lavish praise on themselves and their most prominent leaders. For example: "*The true MYTH of the Brazilian people is emerging!!! DR. SERGIO MORO, an example to all Brazilians of dignity, education, patriotism, courage, justice, seriousness and honor. Thank you, Minister, that's why I voted for Bolsonaro*".

The second category, linked to otherness, encompassed all representations of evil, immediately referring to the versatile figure of the PT (Workers Party) supporter, here equated with signifiers such as: "communist", "corrupt", "thief", "bum" etc. It expressed a community of different people that needed to be disqualified and annihilated, even through violence. In the comments and responses below, we can get a better glimpse of how political opponents figured in the imaginary of the group researched here, with a self-definition that mirrored the image of the other: "*When PT is against us, it's because we're on the right track*". In the same vein, we also have: "*There's always a damn PT member to trash in the comments. (...) Nobody here is a thief's nanny like the PT members*". In this way, opponents always come across as "thugs" or "defenders of thugs", if not both at the same time. Therefore, they always support their position by something more than simple political conviction. In the same vein, another comment said how this "*vanguard of backwardness*", in the opposite direction to morality and progress, these "*useful idiots*" would act against the interests of the "*Brazilian people*", working hard to, as always, "*deliver Barabbas*" instead of the messiah.

<sup>3</sup> Operation Car Wash was a criminal investigation that began in 2014 with the aim of investigating cases of corruption, money laundering and other financial crimes, involving politicians from various parties and especially the oil and construction sectors. In 2019, *The Intercept Brasil* published private *Lava-Jato chats* that cast doubt on the impartiality of members of the task force conducting the operation. At the center of the controversy were former judge Sérgio Moro and prosecutor Deltan Dallagnol. For more information, see Greenwald et al. (2019).

Regarding the Brazilian reality at the time, Solano (2019) reminds us that, in addition to a political and economic crisis exacerbated by corruption scandals that were only partially dealt with, the side effects of social mobility, the expansion of bargaining power and consumption to groups that were once marginalized and the accessibility of computer-mediated communication, which founded new ways of interacting and, therefore, of doing politics, were also being seriously felt. In this context, Dunker (2019) recalls the thesis of the dialectic of progress, according to which the advance of civilization has brought with it its opposite. Based on this, the author argues that the expansion of Brazilian democracy, brought about by social conquests in center-left governments, as well as by the new disposition assumed by sociability and the market in the digital age, has activated a series of conservative and anti-democratic defensive mechanisms in categories that were once more privileged.

In fact, when some acquire rights and others lose privileges, it becomes tempting for the latter to blame the former, denying their specificity and raising ethical abominations to the level of political legitimacy. For example, when people talk about LGBTQI+ pride, they assume that it's also valid to talk about hetero pride; when people argue that black lives matter, they assume that it's equally justified to talk about white lives or any other human life, and so on. Although the crisis has indeed favored the emergence of this dichotomous political logic, what aggravates it are the calculated acts to take political advantage of vague and imprecise dissatisfaction.

It's not for nothing that we observed such a large extent of the encouragement of a rigid distinction between the loved *in-group* and the hated *out-group* in the social interactions studied. However, beyond the merely populist emphasis, this distinction falls into the reification of the believers/non-believers' structure that Adorno (2015b) identified as a constitutive factor of the fascist propaganda pattern. The validity of this attribution becomes even more evident if we evaluate some aspects of the conflicts observed in the research field, for example, what happened when an ideological opponent accessed the MBL page and made a post, whether arguing in an organized and respectful manner or with curses and slogans. Regardless of what they said, the general rule was for the members identified with the group to attribute to the dissident a symbolic charge that placed them as just another average element in the "them" category, so that any criticism of the government of the time could be answered with remarks about former president Lula and his party.

This is what happened after the MBL's own page published an audio in which Sérgio Moro apologized for having "possibly" called them "fools", as leaks reported by *The Intercept Brasil* and by part of the mainstream media denounced. There was then an increase in comments from people who, once sympathetic or not, were beginning to feel dissatisfied with the government. They would make fun of the situation, but without mentioning anything related to the left or former president Lula. In response, they would get: "*And you're the ass who shouts Lula free and comes to laugh at the others*". Or: "*The communist scum are always making up stories, trying at all costs to tarnish Moro's image, they still haven't swallowed that their master (Lula) is going to spend the rest of his life locked up.*"

MBL leaders once criticized the Bolsonaro government, which generated repercussions in the media and, according to some of the page's followers, strengthened the left. In this power play, the MBL lost some of its supporters, who began to consider it not much better than the rest of the "*communist scum*". As the plot unfolded, one user responded to a demonstration by Kim Katagui, one of the MBL's main leaders, in defense of Sérgio Moro: "*But you hadn't turned the tables???????*". At various points, Katagui was attacked and even compared to former president Lula: "*You didn't know how to deal with fame, Lulinha with your eyes pulled out, get out (...)*", "*You lie just as much as Lula*". Or: "*Gee, I'm sorry: so young and now on the team of Lula, Dirceu, Maia (...)*". What's more, the MBL page itself has been irreparably tarnished for some people: "*MBL in one week has completely turned into a left-wing page, very disappointed*". Referring directly to Kim Katagui, the following comment illustrates very well the type of mechanism usually used in the face of demonstrations of disagreement: "*Well, you're against our president Bolsonaro, you have to define which side you're on because it's difficult, I trusted you*".

In another of the moments we witnessed during the research period, when discussing the current Brazilian pension reform with an oppositionist, a participant in the group proposed that she read the bill presented on the subject. Soon afterwards, however, she changed her mind, perhaps because she had visited her interlocutor's profile: "*You're a PSOL (a left wing party) activist, forget it, even if you read it you won't understand anything, you'd have to draw another picture to explain the first picture!!!*". This feeling of generalized incomprehension, that there is no point in communicating, characteristic of the current Brazilian political climate, was highly widespread in the comments analyzed. For example, in: "*If after everything that's happened in the country you still stop to argue with a petista, you're the crazy one! We're not psychiatrists!*". Therefore, the notion that dialog is beyond the horizon of possibility prevails, and it is up to the political adversary to attribute the caricatures of lack of intelligence or madness.

Another point that we find interesting is the submission and subservience with which the members of the group prostrated themselves to some of their leaders, declaring that they supported them unconditionally. This support was also based on the relativization of truth and the criteria for validating knowledge. This is what the following post suggests: "*Deltan, I don't even need to hear you to know that you're right. Just what you are doing for the country clearly shows your intentions*".

Or: “*This Mr. Justice Minister Moro, he always knows what he’s doing. I will always be on his side in the decisions he makes*”. In the same vein, while expressing his gratitude for a video published by Kim Kataguiri in which he evaluated the content of the leaked conversations and gave his verdict that there was no irregularity in them, a user commented: “*Kim, I don’t like the terms of advocacy and all the fallacy they use, but listening to your words makes everything very clear and understandable. Keep it up. Congratulations*”.

Still regarding both the episode of the audio leaks and the relativization of truth and the criteria for validating knowledge pointed out earlier, it is worth adding how many comments have emerged to deny the veracity of the leaks. Thus, according to supporters of then minister Sérgio Moro: “*It doesn’t seem to be Moro’s voice (sic)*”, “*That was never Moro*”, “*That’s fake (sic)*” etc. Furthermore, by broadcasting news about what happened and giving it some prominence, respected media such as the *BBC*, *CNN*, *CBN*, *The Guardian* and *Folha de São Paulo* were immediately reduced by MBL members to “*extreme left-wing media*”. Whenever these media outlets were mentioned by interlocutors, responses followed such as: “*The same media that received money from past governments to keep quiet about crimes? The left is garbage and you’re a mortadella eater. LulaTaPresoBabaca (Lula is in prison, idiot)*”.

In view of this pattern of conduct in the relationship with the other, let’s remember how, in Freud’s terms (1921/2020b), the leader can be seen as the binding of a whole bundle of clamors or dissatisfactions whose substance is that of a demand placed and recovered by the perfection attributed to him as the object that heals the demands of the *ideal of the self* that guides the masses. We thus understand the almost unconditional nature of the support offered by the masses as a subsidiary of a truth that is given in a personified and *a priori* way, not from what is said, but from the identity of the speaker. Incidentally, the Freudian text also attributes to the *ideal of the self* the function of proof of reality, derived from the type of relationship that the hypnotized person has with the hypnotist, considering that the latter leads the former to: “*(...) dreamily experience what he affirms and requests*” (Freud, 1921/2020b, p. 74). One observation, however, is appropriate at this point: even though later, in *The Self and the Id*, Freud (1923/2011) rectifies the above thesis, we argue that bringing this function back to the *self* does not compromise the reading we make here, based on Adorno’s (1951/2015b) critical appropriation according to which the leadership pattern of the fascist masses would allow us to propose a certain interchangeability between *self* and *ideal*.

Regarding this question, we find in Adorno (2015b) an interesting understanding of the changes that leadership patterns have undergone in the last century, where the device of the little-great-man has gained prominence, that is, the leader who simultaneously performs exceptionality and mundanity. This device promotes a kind of compromise solution to the conflict between desiring authority and, at the same time, submission, since: “*by making the leader his ideal*”, the twentieth-century subject loves ‘himself, so to speak, but frees himself from the stains of frustration and unease that disfigure the image of his own empirical self’ (Adorno, 2015b, p. 169). In Adorno’s terms (2015b), a deeper regression than in previous centuries took place during this period, which, going beyond the classic structures of the *Oedipus complex* advocated by Freud, reactivated even more primitive narcissistic anxieties and mechanisms.

There are, in fact, several points captured in the discourses of the subjects we observed that reinforce the thesis that, beyond a mere populist manifestation, we are facing a movement that links them to a model of identification very similar to that attributed to the fascist masses studied by Adorno (2015b). In this sense, *in addition* to the kind of rigid relationship between *in-group* and *out-group* that makes up the stereotyped, *ticket-based* thinking<sup>4</sup> that organizes reality into large blocks and the personalization and mobilization of the little-big-man device, there is an intense worship of nationalist symbols and discourses among them. In the case of the MBL Facebook page, the Brazilian flag and its colors, along with the terms “*homeland*”, “*pride*” and “*Brazilians*” were frequent images. Here we add, following Paxton (2007, p. 287), that: “*The new fascisms would probably give preference to the typical and patriotic costumes of their country of origin over foreign swastikas and fasces*”. See, for example, the re-appropriation and massive presence of the Brazilian national soccer team’s jersey in the street demonstrations of the Brazilian (extreme) right.

### Final considerations

As explained above, our main objective with the research that gave rise to this article was to assess the regime of identifications involved in what has been understood as Brazilian political polarization, a process in which the extreme right has gained prominence at a national level. After approaching this process from its psychological dimension through the systematic monitoring of an avowedly liberal political website such as the MBL, we believe that the phenomenon of political polarization in our country does reveal something of the structure of an authoritarian personality that continues to be present not only in Brazil, but also in contemporary capitalist culture, thus intrinsically making up its modes of production and life.

This is because, over the course of months of theoretical and empirical research, we have identified in the object of study a whole series of structures and devices characteristic of the regime of identifications present in the type of masses

<sup>4</sup> According to Adorno (2019, p. 522), *tickets* are: “*standardized, opaque and overwhelming social processes that leave the ‘individual’ little freedom of action and true individuation*”.

emphasized by Freud (1921/2020b) and Adorno (2015b) in the first half of the 20th century. In particular, the symbolic and affective dichotomy that nourished the relationship between the loved *in-group* and the hated *out-group*, stereotyped thinking, the tendency to submit and identify with power, personalization in the field of politics, the absence of rational and objective agendas, negative cohesion through hatred and exclusion, as well as the function of the little-big-man and an exacerbated nationalism that takes on a cult-like, mystified tone.

It is the presence of these elements that leads us to the assertion that there is a libidinal structure underlying these masses in which there is a marked narcissistic element, even if this structure is accompanied by other significant constellations different from those presented by the classic European fascism analyzed by Adorno in his time and context. In view of these results, we therefore understand that the current updating of the libidinal structure of the fascist masses, in whose dynamics *self* and *ideal* are not substantially separated, does not correspond to a deviation from the current trends of liberal democracy in Brazil and around the world.

In the Brazilian case in particular, the historical circumscription of a long and intense colonial and slave-owning process, as well as, of course, the regrettable inability to elaborate on the violent and authoritarian past represented by the colonial enterprise and a military dictatorship that lasted decades (1964-1985), point to the extent to which the totalitarian enlightenment has certainly imposed its guidelines on us, which reverberates today in terms of our expression as a collectivity. In this context, subjectivities become susceptible to mutilation, with fascism and its basic libidinal structure being one of the expressions of this violent integration. For, as pointed out earlier, in capitalist culture the conditions of subjectivation favour the formation of structurally fascist masses, which can even survive the fall of politically manifest fascisms, remaining apparently depoliticized as an ideological and psychological syndrome of prejudice that is always ready to repoliticize itself, and this repoliticization is what we seem to be witnessing in Brazil today.

However, we need to add some important information to this question. For example, it is argued that it is not possible for around half of the Brazilian population to be considered fascists, including the extreme right and their “moderate”, neutral and indifferent allies. The problem here is that, according to Adorno and Horkheimer (1985), the very processes of producing life in capitalist society, in other words, the norm itself as we know it, have elevated fascism to something more than a subjective choice. For the authors, since the middle of the last century, the structural core of fascism has become part of the processes of constitution of the very subjectivity forged in the steel rhythm of industrialized culture, so that it would be possible to speak of a fascist society, that is, a society whose institutional physiognomy and devices reproduce models linked to the conflicts and mechanisms characteristic of domination, segregation and exploitation and, therefore, of the constellation of fascism, due to its significance in the process of constitution of the modern world. Fascism establishes a relationship of continuity with liberal democracies through the industrialization of culture (Duarte, 2010).

On this level of understanding, fascism then appears as the typical expression of regression in supposedly rational culture: through it, the secularism of modern states betrays itself by maintaining a cult structure, but translated into the elements of culture, which would, by the way, only be the intensification of one of the meanings that this concept already encompassed originally. After all, the new anthropological type represented by the authoritarian personality is the historical form of barbarism circumscribed in the contemporary civilizational process as it affects subjectivity not only in positive terms, but also in terms of its potential.

With this, we believe that what we have witnessed in recent years was not exactly the sudden conversion of half the Brazilian population to fascism, because, as we intended to clarify above, we have adopted the assumption here that relevant traits of fascism as a social and subjective phenomenon can be taken as intrinsically linked to the historical processes of life production in the modern world. From this perspective, fascism is linked to the very development of bourgeois principles. Brazil, of course, was no stranger to such developments.

So we defend the idea that what we are witnessing today in this country is the politicization (or repoliticization) of a general psychological and ideological configuration that already contained within itself a whole inclination towards discrimination and the violent suppression of differences in the name of identity and the universalist principle, and which has been wielded since the middle of the last century in order to mobilize the masses against their own rational interests (Adorno, 2015b). In short, the reactivation of a latent potential underlying the homogenizing imposition of a cultural unity based on the myth of racial democracy (Ribeiro, 2006).

From this perspective, fascism in no way represents a point outside the curve in relation to the trends followed by contemporary capitalist societies, where, despite some significant achievements in the formal field, they continue to perpetuate the same predatory and totalitarian practices, supported by the indifference of capital and camouflaged behind the liberal notions of a representative market and abstract equality. The association between neoliberal ideologues and right-wing dictatorships is a practical example of this. As Safatle (2018) suggests, since fascism is not a manifestation foreign to so-called civilized Western culture, we should redirect our criticism to what we understand as the social norm itself and, obviously, to the forms of life it produces and the procedures through which it recognizes them.

But despite these preliminary findings, or perhaps precisely because of them, there are still some questions to be answered, with which we provocatively close this article. We do so in the hope that they will serve as invitations for

new and necessary studies on the subject developed so far. For example: if the authoritarian libidinal structure we have described and analyzed is not limited to the extreme right, what are the implications of recognizing it in progressive social movements? What is behind this repoliticization of the authoritarian personality in the Brazilian national context and what regressive content does it imply? What's more, what role do the new information and communication technologies play in this process? Last but not least: How can psychoanalysis and social theory, the heuristic tools we have focused on throughout these pages, effectively collaborate, whether through education or therapy, in confronting this state of affairs towards an emancipatory praxis?

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### Mailing address

Raphael Santos das Mercês  
E-mail: [raphaelmerces@gmail.com](mailto:raphaelmerces@gmail.com)

Mauricio Souza  
E-mail: [souza.mr@gmail.com](mailto:souza.mr@gmail.com)



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