



“BRAZIL ABOVE ALL; THE MARKET ABOVE EVERYONE”: NATIONALISM, ECONOMIC LIBERALISM AND POPULISM IN BOLSONARO GOVERNMENT

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Texto para discussão GEEP/IESP - Nº 01/2021
Discussion Paper GEEP/IESP - No 01/2021
Setembro / 2021



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**“Brazil above all; the market above everyone”:
Nationalism, economic liberalism and populism in Bolsonaro government***

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Abstract: Given the neoliberal agenda implemented by the Paulo Guedes’ Ministry of Economy, the Bolsonaro government’s nationalist stance has been prompting academic debates over its rationales. This article explores the contradictions between the Bolsonaro government’s economic policy and its nationalist rhetoric. It argues that, once the foundations of Bolsonaro’s nationalism are understood, there is no contradiction between the two. Considering the economic sphere, the neoliberal agenda pursued by Paulo Guedes would appear to be at odds with what is generally understood as economic nationalism. However, once the Bolsonaro government’s populist nature is taken into account, its alleged nationalism can be clarified.

Keywords: Bolsonaro government; economic liberalism; nationalism; populism; Brazil

* The paper contains information until 10 July 2021.

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1. Introduction

Given the neoliberal economic agenda pursued by Paulo Guedes at the Ministry of the Economy, the Bolsonaro government's nationalist character has prompted academic debates over its origins and rationales. As Bresser-Pereira (2019a) observed, in Brazil we have “a strange marriage between an extreme right-wing nationalist and neoliberalism, while in the rich world, right-wing nationalism is opposed to neoliberalism”. Boito Jr. (2020) argued that Bolsonaro's nationalism can be understood in view of the fascist nature of the political movement he represents, sustained as it is primarily in the field of discourse, while economic policy in place since the Temer government and considered a “sell-out” is being pursued ever more intensively. Along similar lines, Freixo and Pinheiro-Machado (2019:19) incorporated “patriotic”, nationalist rhetoric into their definition of Bolsonarism, which is also characterised by an ultraconservative worldview “critical of all that is in the slightest identified with the left and progressivism”.

With reference to that debate, this article endeavours to understand the relationship between the Bolsonaro government's economic policy and its nationalist rhetoric. It will be argued that there is no contradiction between them once the fundamentals of Bolsonarist nationalism are understood. True, when only the economic policy dimension is considered, the neoliberal agenda implemented by Economy Minister Paulo Guedes seems completely at variance with what is understood as economic nationalism. On the other hand, on the ideological level, the Bolsonaro government is guided by a conservative nationalism which benefits from the President's populist behaviour. In developing this hypothesis here, the analysis is conducted in two stages: in the first, the economic (and foreign) policy strategy and options of the first years of the Bolsonaro government are examined in the light of theoretical considerations regarding economic nationalism; then, Bolsonaro's *modus operandi* is held up against what the academic literature has understood populism to be.

The chosen methodology consists in a review of the specialised literature on the topics specified above, in addition to articles in specialised newspapers and blogs, which will support the analysis of both the economic measures taken by the Bolsonaro government and the President's discourse. The article is divided into four sections, in addition to this Introduction. Section 2 reviews the recent literature on conservative and economic nationalism and populism, to provide theoretical underpinning for the hypothesis. Section 3 examines the Bolsonaro government's economic policy, so as to highlight its neoliberalism and, consequently, its

antinationalism. Section 4 seeks to operationalise the hypothesis advanced here by identifying the populist content of the government's pronouncements, from which explanations are drawn for the nationalism in question. The final Section concludes the article.

2. Nationalism and populism

This section will discuss two basic concepts that are key to this study: nationalism (Section 2.1) and populism (Section 2.2). It then assesses the recent experience of the Bolsonaro government.

2.1. Nationalism and economic nationalism

The argument of this article is developed, first by situating economic nationalism as just one dimension of nationalism, which can be understood more broadly. For that purpose, Vincent (2002; 2013) defined nationalism in terms of 1) people's understanding deriving from their belonging to groups, which have their own history and tradition and/or culture expressed through the nation; 2) national identity as the cement that gives individuals existential meaning; and 3) a frame for values and concepts such as freedom, equality, rights and autonomy, which can only be understood or operationalised when placed in a national context.

Vincent also argued that twentieth-century nationalism is different from what characterised the formation of European nation-States in the nineteenth century. While formerly it had a certain unity of content, because it served as the ideological discourse that gave meaning to nation-States at the 19th century (Anderson, 2008), once these were established, the ideology took on a diversity of types that had not existed previously.

As the ideology involved is broad in content, nationalism is considered to depend on other ideologies in order to offer political solutions in different specific contexts (Vincent, 2013:551). Accordingly, nationalism can be present in left-wing, post-colonial movements, through to the right of the political spectrum. When anchored in conservatism, it tends to assume that the formation of hierarchies and elites is natural. As it is proper to conservatism to value order and authority (Freedon, 2006), this strand of nationalism tends to discredit individuals' capacity for self-government, which in turn tends to produce mistrust of the democratic model itself. This modality of the ideology also holds to a concept of nation identified with an idealised past which must be preserved.

Beyond being a political ideology, nationalism can also refer to a certain position on the functioning of the economy. Helleiner (2002) coined one quite widely accepted definition of economic nationalism, according to which it hinges on the imperative of serving national interests and protecting national identity; it works to promote national unity, identity and autonomy, which are to be achieved through a variety of economically nationalist policies (see also Bluhm and Varga, 2019). There are, however, variations in economic nationalism formatted by countries' socio-economic situations, institutions and political systems, as well as by their international positions.

In Economics, nationalism has its roots in the work of Hamilton (1791) and the German economist, Friedrich List (1846), who advocated protectionism in certain circumstances as an instrument for fostering the industrialisation in less-developed countries, in what became known as the “infant industry argument”. In that respect, nationalism is regarded as opposed to economic liberalism.

Bresser-Pereira (2019b: 853) defined economic nationalism as “an ideology that emerged with the formation of nation-States and only gained substance in the nineteenth century” and which presupposes “the existence of a nation able to form a coalition of nationalist and developmentalist classes and specify a national development project” (p. 856). Nationalism assumes a society in which citizens share the conviction that State and government should further the interests of national labour and capital; that is, should foster the nation's economic development by its own means. As the nation is the chief agent of economic development and nationalism is the ideology of the nation-State, developmentalism and nationalism are regarded as nearly synonymous expressions, the former definable as an “ideology of development directed to industrialisation and resting on moderate State intervention in the economy and on furthering national interests in a world in which competition among nations is stronger than cooperation” (Bresser-Pereira , 2019: 853).

2.2. Populism

Even though bound up with experiences that date from the nineteenth century, the concept of populism is not a consensus in the social sciences. Over the course of the twentieth century, this categorisation contemplated regimes of differing ideological shades and situated in differing contexts, which has contributed to the disagreement over its definition. However, academic debate on the subject has gained new impetus with the recent rise of governments and

movements labelled as populist. In the midst of this scenario, this maturing concept has made it possible to understand political, social and economic events relating to it.

Laclau (2005) argued that populism can be understood as a mode of grassroots organisation resulting from the juxtaposition of a series of social demands not met by institutional channels of democratic representation. He saw these dissatisfactions – although heterogeneous in origin – as rooted in a widely shared sentiment of hostility towards the establishment. Given the scenario of economic stagnation, labour precarization and a shrinking middle class that has descended on western economies since the final decades of the twentieth century, populism has been associated by the literature with developments from globalisation (Milanovic, 2016; Rodrik, 2018). In that context, populist political movements have instrumentalised grassroots disillusionment with politics to their electoral benefit.

It is against that backdrop that the literature has discussed the populist *modus operandi* for attaining power through institutional channels. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) proposed to explain this in terms of an ideology mobilised for electoral gains. To that end, they argued, its core comprises three basic concepts: a “people”, deliberately treated as homogeneous, which is portrayed as having a “general will” thwarted by the action of a “corrupt elite”, which acts only in its own interests. This alienation of the establishment from the rest of the people allows institutional channels of democratic representation to be discredited, warranting direct channels of communication between populist leaders and their constituencies. In addition, in view of the thin core of populist ideology, it is not only possible, but inevitable, that it will be reconciled with other ideologies. It can thus be understood why the populist label has come to be applied to historical experiences ranging from neoliberal and developmentalist. In this light it can be understood how the Bolsonaro government is a populist venture mobilised by way of a conservative nationalist discourse.

Urbinati (2019), meanwhile, sought to develop a political theory of populism, so as to understand the *modus operandi* of populist leaders now in power. As also suggested by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), she pointed out that the exclusion of the political establishment from “the people” comes to mean that all those who do not form part of the populist electoral constituency are so excluded from the populist notion of “the people” One extreme consequence of this is that, in populist rhetoric, “the people” can come to constitute a minority of the country’s population.

This is done by establishing a permanent election campaign climate designed to mobilise the support base and, in parallel, undermine the traditional institutions of democratic

representation – for instance, political parties, the media and parliament. Thence the recurrent endeavour by populist leaders to communicate directly with their bases, facilitated today by the use of social media, but which historically occurred by way of institutional mechanisms, such as referenda and plebiscites. These channels for communicating with voters also allow populists to blame invariably the establishment for any lack of concrete policy outcomes benefiting the population. In fact, the populists' relation with their electoral constituencies is guided by faith in the leader, and not by results delivered by their governments. Ultimately, this can lead to a resignification of democracy itself, where only the populist electoral base enjoys legitimacy as “the people”, while all others are seen, on the contrary, as hindrances to fulfilling the will of “the people”.

As a result, swings towards authoritarianism resulting from this behaviour, which use institutional channels to destroy the pillars of liberal democracy, are being widely debated in the literature (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

3. The Bolsonaro government's economic policy

This section considers the Bolsonaro government in terms of its economic agenda and certain components of its foreign policy. Overall, both the government's neoliberal measures and its foreign policy of alignment with the United States of Donald Trump, in our view, constitute a position that finds no parallel in far-right governments anywhere else in the world.

3.1. The Bolsonaro government's economic nationalism

There is continuity between the Temer (2016-2018) and Bolsonaro (2019-....) governments in their implementing a neoliberal agenda of orthodox macroeconomic policies, as it was recognized by Temer himself (BBC, 2020).

Boito Jr. (2020) considers the Temer government to be different in that, although submissive, just like the Bolsonaro government, it went about it more discreetly, while the Bolsonaro government is submissive while ostentatiously nationalist. As will be argued in Section 4, this stems from the conservative nationalism guiding the Bolsonaro government and from its populist behaviour, neither of which was seen under the Temer government. Boito Jr. (2020) argues that Bolsonaro's nationalism is conservative and fascist, with a “pro-capitalist, racist, patriarchal ideology, which to Bolsonarists are attributes of Brazilian nationality” – a

nationalism also expressed in discourse opposing globalism and the multilateral institutions and in its fetishisation of national symbols.

However, while there seems to be no doubt of Bolsonaro's conservative nationalism, the same is not true of his economic nationalism. In this regard, the evidence points to a deep-rooted antinationalism, which extends also to foreign policy, given the government's slavish alignment with United States interests (at least during the Trump administration) and its adoption of neoliberal economic policies leaning strongly towards denationalisation. Paradigmatic examples in this regard include the change in the oil exploration regime applied to Brazil's pre-salt deposits at the request of foreign oil corporations and Bolsonaro's decision, right at the start of his government, not to exercise his veto power (the golden share clause) over Embraer's incorporation by Boeing – it cannot be stressed enough that Embraer was one of the few competitive Brazilian firms in sophisticated technology sectors.

In fact, historically, Brazilian conservative nationalism has not displayed a pattern of economic and political autonomy from the USA. One of the ideologues of the military dictatorship, Couto and Silva (1981) argued, in a Cold War context, that Brazil should align itself with the United States' interests. The supposed rationale was that there was a powerful external enemy represented by Communism, which threatened the Western, Christian tradition of which Brazil formed part. In that conjuncture, alignment with United States power was crucial in that it guaranteed a powerful ally and, at the same time, kept Brazil within the sphere of influence of a Western, Christian country.

A similar interpretation can be perceived in a 2017 text by the Foreign Minister of Jair Bolsonaro's government between January 2019 and March 2021. In "*Trump e o Ocidente*" [Trump and the West], Ernesto Araújo (2017) argued that the then President of the USA represented a lost ideal of the Western, Christian tradition, which had "[...] died in Europe to all effects, but flourishes in the USA". Both the former Minister and the current President are untiring in their praise of the writings of Olavo de Carvalho, the chief ideologue of the Brazilian far right, whose Decadent reading of the West goes hand-in-hand with the blame he places on the same Communism as was used decades ago to justify the military regime's joining the United States bloc in the Cold War.

Given that ideological framing, it must be said that the Bolsonaro government forms part of a wave of conservative nationalist experiments around the world, but contrasts with them in its antinationalist economic policy agenda. Bluhm and Varga (2019) noted that, although governments in Eastern Europe and Russia may be authoritarian and conservative, the State can

be seen to be conservatively developmentalist and leaning away from the neoliberal approach by financing specific sectors and controlling key sectors of the economy. Bolsonaro's Brazil thus diverges from these far-right governments. It even differs from Erdogan's Turkey, which initially applied neoliberal policies, but has been expanding its welfare state and, at the same time, transitioning, since the 2018-2019 crisis, to a "reluctant developmentalism", involving greater State involvement in the economy (Akçay, 2020).

There is also supposed to be a contradiction between the Bolsonaro government's anti-globalist foreign policy stance and its policy favouring foreign capital over domestic businesses. This raises the issue that Operation Carwash¹ seems to have been one of the factors contributing to a certain "criminalisation" of developmentalist policies in Brazil, in that it favoured the narrative that such policies lead to a bloated State and thus were responsible for growing corruption. On that logic, the best way to combat corruption would be to downsize the State. Paulo Guedes sold that narrative to Bolsonaro, convincing him that the expansion of public spending had led Brazil to stagnate and perverted politics, while also accusing the public banks of funding powerful business groups solely because of their political connections.

In this regard, in his acceptance speech on taking office as Economy Minister, Guedes declared: "Private pirates, corrupt bureaucrats and creatures from the political swamps have partnered against the Brazilian people". In the same speech, he stated that he understood the movement of which he was part to be a centre-right alliance comprising economic liberals (himself), on the one hand, and social conservatives (Bolsonaro), on the other. That coalition would be fundamental in removing the centre-left – responsible, in his view, for a mixture of corruption with excessive government spending – from power. Guedes argued that downsizing the State would make Brazil's economy more efficient and eliminate incentives to "thievery": "the greater the degree of intervention in the economy, the lower the growth rate and the greater the degree of corruption" (Folha, 2019b).

The literature (Mannheim, 1981; Freedman, 2006) indicates that, unlike liberalism and socialism, there is no economic discourse intrinsic to conservative ideology. Accordingly, depending on the political conjuncture, conservatives' preservationist instincts may lead them equally to advocate a State that is interventionist in the economy or to adhere to neoliberalism. In the same way, neoliberalism (Rosanvallon 2002; Freedman, 2006; Lynch, 2021) subjects

¹ Paula et al. (2020) show evidence that Operation Carwash ("*Lava-Jato*" in Portuguese) contributed to generating and worsening the economic crisis in 2015 and 2016, which adversely affected the civil construction and oil and gas sectors and caused abrupt falls in company revenues and employment in those industries. See also Augusto Jr et al (2021).

politics to the economy and may accept different political views providing they uphold its pillars of non-interference in the market and deregulation of private enterprise. In the Brazilian case, the marriage was between President Bolsonaro's conservative, populist nationalism and Paulo Guedes' neoliberalism.

3.2. Neoliberal economic policy under Bolsonaro and Paulo Guedes

The Bolsonaro government is thus continuing with the neoliberal economic agenda implemented since the Temer government – a series of policies that Oreiro and Paula (2021, ch.4) termed a “Brazilian Thatcherism”, comprising conventional deployment of macroeconomic policies – monetary policy directed to inflation targets, austerity in fiscal policy, which has included capping expenditures, and a floating exchange rate policy – and introduction of liberalising reforms including: (i) a labour reform approved in late 2016, introducing a series of measures to bring greater flexibility to the labour market; (ii) a spending cap, which implemented a 20-year freeze on real government expenditures by stipulating that public spending would be adjusted by the prior year's inflation; and (iii) a social security reform approved on 12 November 2019.

In addition to liberal reforms, at the start of his administration, Paulo Guedes promised an ambitious programme of privatisations of State enterprises which would raise some R\$ 1.2 trillion, an amount sufficient to repay the public debt at the time (Folha, 2020d). However, because of political difficulties and the government's own ineffectiveness, the privatisations have made little progress in the first two years of Bolsonaro government. The one exception was the sale of 30% of government shares in BR Distribuidora, leaving it with a 41% minority holding. In late 2020 the President of Petrobrás announced that sales of its refineries would be resuming, now favoured by the Supreme Court decision that refinery privatisations no longer needed congressional authorisation (Valor, 2020).

In 2021, Bolsonaro government retook its programme of privatization. In this connection, in 21 June 2021, National Congress approved the permission that government may privatize Eletrobrás, a state-owned enterprise and the major Brazilian electric utilities company, with the reduction of the government share in the total equity stake from 60% to 45% (G1, 2021a). In 5 July 2021, federal government announced its intention to sell 100% of equities of “Correios”, state-owned Post Company. Voting on the government's law project is expected shortly in the Chamber of Deputies.

There are two theoretical assumptions underlying Temer's and Bolsonaro's strategy of "Brazilian Thatcherism". The first is its focus on what, in Economics, is known as supply-side economics, which maintains that economic growth can be stimulated by policies directed to supply, i.e., reducing taxes, cutting back regulation on markets, building pro-market institutions (property rights, good corporate governance etc.) and creating the right conditions for the business environment to improve, which it regards as fundamental to attracting foreign capital. The second is the Expansionary Fiscal Contraction (EFC) hypothesis supported by Alesina and Ardagna (2010), according to which fiscal contraction can boost private sector confidence and encourage new consumption and investment decisions, thus triggering a crowding-in effect on private spending decisions, which in turn resulting in stronger economic growth.

These assumptions pose two problems. The first is that, even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the economic crisis in Brazil had to do with a lack of demand rather than supply-side problems. Following a strong recession in 2015 and 2016 (GDP fell by 3.4% p.a. on average), the Brazilian economy remained semi-stagnant from 2017 to 2019 (mean growth was only 1.51% p.a.), while the unemployment rate was 11.6% in February 2020 (as compared to 6.5% in December 2014²), accompanied by a strong increase in precarious (informal, intermittent, part-time etc.) occupation. In fact, since 2015 the Brazilian government has been cutting its expenditures, which – according to the liberal creed – should, in combination with the liberal reforms, result in stronger growth. This did not happen: the neoliberal strategy has yielded very disappointing results.

The second problem is the fragile empirical underpinning for the EFC hypothesis: the literature, in addition to overlooking significant variables, has never identified more than patterns of correlation, rather than causality (Paula and Pires, 2017). Importantly, in Brazil's case, Constitutional Amendment 95 imposing the spending cap prevents any fiscal policy management, which is a fundamental tool for smoothing out the economic cycle: if the economy grows faster than expected, government revenues will rise more than forecast, but it will be unable to spend the surplus, because its expenditures are limited by the rule just introduced; on the other hand, as the spending cap rule requires zero real growth in total spending, any real increase in mandatory expenditures entails reducing discretionary spending in the same amount, so that total primary expenditures remain constant and do not exceed the target (Barbosa, 2019). The outcome of this rule is that, given the difficulty of remaining within the spending cap target,

² Ipeadata data (2021).

the government finds itself forced to cut more and more discretionary expenditures, which is why Guedes has called for the removal of earmarks on mandatory expenditures.

Lastly, even though the fiscal rules were applied with some temporary flexibility in 2020 in order to address the economic and social effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which allowed a broad set of emergency policies to be introduced, Bolsonaro and his Economy Minister reaffirmed their commitment to maintaining the spending cap in 2021, signalling a return to the “old normal”, i.e., the liberal policies and austerity that characterised the period prior to the pandemic (Paula, 2021). Therefore, Brazilian government’s returned to liberal agenda and orthodox economic policies, in the form of implementation of a new round of reforms – that included the approval by law (24 February 2021) of the Central Bank of Brazil independency³ and of the Emergency Proposal of Constitutional Amendment, approved in 14 March 2021, that implemented new types of restrictions on public expenses for the Union and the subnational entities, with respective prohibitions that must be activated in case certain limits are not complied with (mandatory primary expenditure greater than 95% of total primary expenditure).

Meanwhile, internationally, the Bolsonaro government had broken with the multilateralism and progressive agenda that had guided Brazilian foreign policy in the past. In the culture war sparked by Bolsonarist conservative nationalism, this is one prominent dimension for asserting Brazil’s national identity as a conservative, Christian country – a condition that, according to government ideologues, is under threat from supranational values and institutions (UN, WHO etc.). Casarões (2020) sees this as the source of its clearly anti-globalist stance, in tune with other ultraconservative leaders of the global far right, who aim to discredit international agreements and organisations on the pretext of safeguarding nation-States’ sovereignty, along with their values, interests and particularities – which evidently poses the need to combat globalism.

In this concerted endeavour, the Brazilian government’s automatic alignment with the United States of Donald Trump in 2019 and 2020 was expressed in Brazil’s playing a role subservient to United States interests. Notorious examples in this regard occurred in 2019, when Brazil relinquished its developing-country status at the WTO in exchange for United States support for its application to join the OECD (which never happened), as well as granting the United States access to its military base at Alcântara (Casarões, 2020). Similarly, ever since the

³ The law established that the directors and the President of the BCB will have four-year terms of office, with most of them, including the President, extending beyond the electoral term of the BCB would take office in the third year of the President's term.

election campaign period, there has been a proposal on the table to enact regulatory and legislative changes to favour United States companies on the Brazilian arms and munition market (Folha, 2020a).

In parallel, Bolsonaroist guidelines for Brazilian foreign policy have set the country on a collision course with some of its most important strategic partners. Especially relevant in this context are its relations with China, which is emerging as the United States' main economic and geopolitical rival in the twenty-first century and has been Brazil's leading trade partner since 2009. That situation, in turn, has seen relations between Brazil and China oscillate between ideology and pragmatism, reflecting power struggles within the Bolsonaro government and precipitating recurrent diplomatic crises in Sino-Brazilian relations.

4. Bolsonaroist populism

Given this panorama, it can now be considered how Bolsonaro's conservative nationalism has associated with populist behaviour since the election campaign period in 2018. That said, note that the populist roots of Bolsonaro's electoral victory reach back to the years prior to the presidential race, when grassroots dissatisfaction with the political establishment was already evident and brought together heterogeneous movements in opposition to the government, as theorised by Laclau (2005). That scenario took shape with the protests of June 2013, continued through the developments from Operation Carwash and the severe political and economic crisis that assailed the country (Paula et al., 2020) and culminated in the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and the consequent rise of Michel Temer to the presidency – a position in which he would become the world's most unpopular leader (DW, 2017).

In the wake of these events, in the electoral year of 2018, only 9% of Brazil's population declared themselves satisfied with democracy and 90% of those interviewed by Latinobarómetro (2018) believed that Brazil was governed "for the few". This widespread discontent was also portrayed in the scant 6% of Brazilians who perceived any progress in their country. Amid one of the worst economic recessions and post-recession recovery in its history – mean real GDP growth was -3.4 in 2015-2016 and 1.6% in 2017-2018 – and corruption scandals involving the traditional political elite, conditions were ripe for populist adventurers to flourish, as diagnosed by Latinobarómetro (2018).

In this regard, by July 2018, Bolsonaro's populist strategy for disputing the elections was already clear. As noted by Bernardes and Barros (2019), his campaign launch speech ticked a series of boxes for items that the academic literature has identified as innate to populism. The then newly postulated candidate Bolsonaro presented himself as an outsider outraged at the corruption of traditional politics and chose corruption and ideology as priority targets in his campaign. These two elements were deployed to homogenise his political adversaries, whom he branded as responsible for the national economic crisis: on the one hand, "the system", particularly as symbolised by Congress, was eminently corrupt and spanned Brazil's entire party-political spectrum; on the other hand, "the left", especially the PT (Workers' Party), was singled out as embodying the ideology that had taken over the apparatus of State and led to the corruption scandals revealed by Operation Carwash.

This served as the basis for a negation of politics that was to permeate candidate Bolsonaro's campaign launch speech. Its counterpart, the opportunity to regenerate Brazil, was made to seem to reside in cultivating the values of conservative nationalism (hierarchy, obedience, honesty and patriotism) that the presidential candidate had absorbed during his military training, which were presented as the path for the people to overcome the corrupt political system. In the future President's words, "this year Brazil needs to elect a man or woman who is honest, has God in their heart and is a patriot" (Bernardes and Barros, 2019: 22). One of Bolsonaro's chief election campaign slogans – "Brazil above everything, God above everyone" – came to reflect his conservative nationalist agenda for the country.

Although this discourse had featured, with demophobic colouring, during Brazil's military dictatorship, it was now re-emerging in the twenty-first century in association with an international wave of right-wing populism. In this way, Bolsonaro kindled conflict between "the people" – homogenised by the crisis in representation demonstrated by Latinobarómetro (2018) – and the political establishment, which was depicted as thwarting the people's will, because it would act only to its own benefit.

Indeed, those were the defining features of both his election campaign and his first two years of government. The keynote of Bolsonaro's electoral campaign propaganda was set by the use of national symbols, such as the colours of the flag and the armed forces. The latter was further reinforced by frequent manifestations of public support from the military for his candidacy, which forged the inevitable link between the armed forces and the political movement dear to the government's ambitions. In this vein, in April of the election year, former commanding army general, Villas Bôas, went as far as to threaten the Supreme Court explicitly

and publicly against granting a *habeas corpus* to former President Lula, then Bolsonaro's main opponent in the presidential race (Conjur, 2018). One week before the second round of the elections, Bolsonaro promised "to sweep Brazil's red bandits from the map" and described himself and his followers as "the true Brazil" (El País, 2018), thus offering empirical proof of the populism theorised in the academic literature.

In parallel, the candidate's scorn for the traditional party system can be seen in another of his key slogans: "My party is Brazil". Note that in November 2019, in the first year of his mandate, the President decided to leave the PSL, the party for which he had disputed the election and, at the time of writing this article, he had not joined any other party. Days earlier, he had repeated his election campaign slogan (Estadão, 2019), revealing the intention to distance himself from the establishment and position himself personally as legitimate spokesman for "the people", which is limited to his electoral constituency – as indicated by the theoretical considerations of Section 2.2.

After the electoral victory, his *modus operandi* continued to be to reconcile conservative nationalism with populist rhetoric – despite the steady advance of the neoliberal agenda examined in the previous section. His acceptance speech to Congress on taking office made further references to the moral deficiency of the preceding governments, together with appeals to defend the "homeland" (Folha, 2019a):

Let me take this solemn moment and call on each member of Congress to help me in the mission of restoring our homeland and putting it back on its feet, to free it once and for all from the yoke of corruption, criminality, economic irresponsibility and ideological submission. [...] building a fairer, developed nation means breaking with practices that have proven harmful to all of us, blighting the political class and holding back progress. Irresponsibility has led us to the greatest ethical, moral and economic crisis of our history.

In the second half of the first year of his mandate, in the midst of the environmental crisis caused by forest fires in the Amazon, which brought an international reaction calling for environmental preservation in Brazil, Bolsonaro made an aggressive speech to the UN General Assembly, supposedly in the name of national sovereignty (Folha, 2019c):

It is a fallacy to say that the Amazon is a heritage of humankind and a mistake – as attested by scientists – to claim that the forest is the lungs of the world. Availing themselves of these fallacies, one country or

another, instead of helping, has gone along with the lies and behaved disrespectfully, in a colonialist spirit. They have questioned what is most sacred to us, our sovereignty.

Less than a month later, during a ceremony to commission a new Brazilian submarine, he once again made a show of voicing nationalist discourse on the pretext of defending the Amazon from purported foreign interests: “Out there, they are trying more and more to put us in a situation as colonised people. We will not permit that”. On that same occasion, he declared that Brazil had internal and external enemies: “Those within are the most terrible. Those outside, we will defeat with technology and determination and deterrents” (EBC, 2019).

Under the Bolsonaro government, given the subordinate role now assigned to Brazil in its foreign policy, the “internal enemies” have indeed gained prominence. Within Brazil, the spectrum of the President’s disfavour has extended to all those who oppose him: in line with the populist primer, they have become enemies of “the people” and of the country. In that connection, during his government, Bolsonaro’s recurrent presence at his supporters’ antidemocratic rallies calling for the closure of Congress and the Supreme Court is representative both of the endeavour to maintain his electoral base permanently mobilised and of his struggle with the other powers of the republic. In the context of the public health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, Bolsonaro made clear his illiberal view of the democratic system clear, declaring himself once more to be the only legitimate representative of “the people”. One illustrative example can be seen in his 19 April 2020 speech to supporters at a demonstration in front of army general headquarters, calling for a military intervention in Brazil (G1, 2020a):

We don’t want to negotiate anything. What we want is action for Brazil. What was old has been left behind. We have a new Brazil ahead of us. Everyone, without exception, has to be a patriot and believe and do their part so that we can put Brazil in the position of prominence it deserves. The time of the scoundrels is over. Now it’s the people in power.

This “people”, as once again made explicit in Bolsonaro’s rhetoric, consists in the more radical portions of his electoral constituency, who deny any legitimacy to other channels of democratic representation and can count on gestures of support from the President in his public pronouncements. In the same direction, by rejecting any possibility of negotiation, the President also acts to undermine the credibility of the legislative and judiciary powers. On the following day, amid the repercussions of his participation in the rally, Bolsonaro declared: “I am the

Constitution” (Folha, 2020b), revealing once again his understanding of the proper role of the President of the Republic.

Note also that, in the demonstration mentioned above, the fact that it was held in front of the army general headquarters is symbolic for two other reasons: on the one hand, because of Bolsonaro’s past of repeatedly exalting the military dictatorship (Veja, 2019); and, on the other, because of the armed forces’ active participation in his government, reflected in the thousands of civil posts – including several ministries – distributed to serving military personnel and reservists. In July 2020, the number of military in civil posts stood at over 6,000 – more than double the number in 2018, during the Temer administration (G1, 2020b).

At the same time, the President has also become notable, since his election campaign, for communicating directly with his constituents through social media. Twitter has become an especially important tool for Bolsonaro to attack his political enemies and mobilise his voters. Meanwhile, one constant goal of his use of social media has been to discredit traditional media channels, which he portrays as propagators of fake news about his government. In April 2019 *Época* magazine (2019) conducted a survey of 3,000 of Bolsonaro’s tweets:

“Press” and “media” were mentioned more than 120 times, nearly always in a derogatory fashion. [...] The other topics that rivalled with the press in the ranking of Bolsonaro’s tweets were his opponents. In this list are terms such as “left”, “members of the PT”, former President Lula (32 mentions) and other adversaries accused of being “corrupt”, of spreading “ideology” and of working to transform Brazil into a “Venezuela”.

In other words, communication via the social media serves the populist purpose of tarnishing the other democratic institutions and harassing the government’s opponents. These latter, in turn, are excluded from the conception of “the people” present in Bolsonaro’s rhetoric and are ultimately presented as its enemies.

The populist *modus operandi* of Bolsonaro can be further noted in the unending political campaign he has been advancing since took office. As we have shown, in the beginning of the pandemic, the Brazilian president joined demonstrations of his supporters, probably aiming at keeping his political basis mobilized. In 2021, as presidential elections were getting closer, his permanent electoral campaign agenda became even clearer, as he joined plenty of biker rallies across the country (G1, 2021b) and boosted his usual narrative of questioning Brazilian electoral process, alleging it would be prone to frauds (Carta Capital, 2021). Meanwhile, he

would often refer to Brazilian military as “my army” (Folha, 2021c), trying to blend himself to the State and implicitly threatening not to respect a defeat in the elections.

The populism practised by Bolsonaro thus ends up being instrumental to the government’s ostentatious nationalism. On the one hand, the rhetoric appealing to national values and symbols, such as the colours of the flag, national sovereignty and the armed forces, acts in this direction in the discursive dimension. On the other hand, his claim to be the only legitimate representative of “the people”, which is constructed by fuelling conflict between the population and the establishment, is designed to dissociate the President from other politicians and thus grant him the prerogative of speaking on behalf of the nation – which is reinforced by direct communication with his voters, particularly through the social media. As explained above, the goal underlying this practice is to make the President personally the vector through which national interests are fulfilled, in line with the conservative nationalism that defines them.

5. Conclusion

This analysis has shown that there is no contradiction between the economic policy agenda pursued by the Bolsonaro government and the conservative nationalism guiding it. From the economic standpoint, the Bolsonaro government, by implementing an agenda that is neoliberal and - at least until Trump presidency - subservient to the interests of the United States, has applied policies at odds with the aims of achieving full national sovereignty and defending national interests. This has combined with a conservative type of nationalism, driven by populist behaviour, including anti-system discourse, cultivation of a direct connection with “the people”, of which he declares himself the legitimate representative, and an exaltation of national symbols.

This combination of neoliberal policy and nationalist rhetoric seems to have no parallel in other recent experiences of far-right governments. This is because there is an apparent contradiction between the Bolsonaro government’s anti-globalisation discourse, in line with that of most far-right governments, and its adoption of neoliberal policies strongly in favour of privatisation and denationalisation. Despite delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, this agenda was resumed in 2021, with the implementation of new round of liberal reforms and the privatization of the Eletrobras.

Furthermore, although during the pandemic Bolsonaro reached an agreement with the “centre bloc” in Congress (a set of political parties with no specific ideological orientation), he

kept his populist modus operandi while avoiding an impeachment process. Indeed, this behaviour has been further enhanced as Brazilian presidential elections of 2022 gets closer. In face of the President's negligence in combating the pandemic and the economic crisis, polls have been suggesting he is likely to lose the re-election. Consequently, as this research suggests, one should expect even more populism in his remaining term, with no substantial improvement in the Brazilian economic situation.

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