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Civic Participation Faces Resentment: Right-wing Movements in Brazil and the Crisis of Democracy

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Abstract

Since 2015, Brazil has been experiencing the explosion of right-wing protests. These protests were assembled by groups organised in digital media, which claimed forms of democratic participation to propagate antidemocratic ideas, such as the shutdown of public policies based on social redistribution of resources to the poorest; the criminalization of the social movements linked to social minorities; and the extinction of councils of popular participation. In this article, we develop a discourse analysis on the Facebook pages of the three major right-wing groups in Brazil, namely, *Movimento Brasil Livre* (MBL), *Vem Pra Rua*, and *Movimento Contra a Corrupção* (MCC). Our sample is composed of 468 posts made by these three groups when they established profiles on Facebook and at the moment of the major right-wing civil protests in Brazil between 2015 and 2018. We aim to understand the discursive strategies adopted by these groups to undermine democratic citizenship purportedly laying claim to its normative terms. We argue that these movements show the dark face of civic action's supposed virtuosity: a vengeful form of resentment.

Keywords: Democracy, Conservatism, Political Mobilization, Civil Society, Resentment.

Introduction

Since 2015, Brazil has been experiencing the explosion of right-wing protests that came to light during the parliamentary coup against the former President Dilma Rousseff (Tatagiba, Trindade, and Teixeira, 2015; Avritzer, 2017; Tatagiba, 2017), which culminated in the election of the far-right congressman Jair Bolsonaro as the 38^o President of Brazil¹. These protests were assembled by groups organized in digital media, which claimed forms of democratic participation to propagate undemocratic ideas, such as the shutdown of public policies based on social redistribution of resources to the poorest; the criminalization of the social movements of gender, race, and class; and the extinction of popular participation councils.

Aligned with an upsurge of right-wing movements around the globe, i.e. the alt-right at the US (Nagle, 2017), and the extreme right on Europe (Peters, 2015), these protesters strategically demand active citizenship based on core democratic values (i.e. the freedom of speech and the right to take part on decision-making processes) to vindicate the most antidemocratic requests, such as the shutdown of parliament by a military coup, just as happened in 1964 in Brazil. Calling themselves the ge-

¹ Jair Bolsonaro was a former army captain who gained popularity in Brazil by his explicitly extreme right agenda based on the praise of the military dictatorship that lasted in the country from 1964 to 1985 (Gentile, 2018). His alignment with new far-right groups relies on the claim to the conservative values and the explicit resentment regarding any social minorities. Accordingly, from 2015 onwards several public demonstrations in Brazil began to extol the figure of Jair Bolsonaro.

nuine “Brazilian people,” they also aim to neutralize the sense of injustice of social minorities, denying their requests as “false victimization.”

In this article, we intend to develop a critical discourse analysis of the Facebook postings of the three major right-wing groups in Brazil, namely, *Movimento Brasil Livre* (MBL), *Vem Pra Rua*, and *Movimento Contra a Corrupção* (MCC)². Our sample is composed of 468 posts made by these three groups when they established profiles on Facebook and at the moment of the major right-wing civil protests in Brazil between 2015 and 2018. We aim to understand the discursive strategies adopted by these groups to undermine democratic citizenship purportedly laying claim to its normative terms. In order to advance a research agenda that has detailed the common characteristics, the worldviews and the forms of political mobilization of activists of the “new Brazilian right” (Tatagiba *et al.*, 2015; Messenberg, 2017; Tatagiba, 2017; dos Santos and Chagas, 2018), we argue that those movements show the dark face (Quandt, 2018) of the supposed virtuosity of civic action. As we discuss, this argument does not presume a defence of the representative mechanisms as the only way to counter this influx of antidemocratic participation. Instead, it is a request to a more cautious definition of civic participation, distinguished from the excessive enthusiasm of the hegemonic trends on this issue.

We contend that not every “experience of injustice” within the representative democracy will conduct to a virtuous form of participation by civil actors. In so many cases, as in the right-wing movements of Brazil, the moral emotions that underlie the political action are based on a vengeful resentment, as conceptualized first by Friedrich Nietzsche (1987) and recently recovered by several scholars (Brown, 1993; Fassin, 2013; Ure, 2015; Brighi, 2016). Distinct from the civic reactions of social minorities to disrespects performed by hegemonic groups, the revanchist form of resentment that sustains the actions of right-wing groups in Brazil is based on bitterness against scapegoats (namely, feminists, black people, and the left activists on the general), virtually responsible for the loss of their hegemony and their rancour against democracy.

The argument will be developed in this way: first, we critically discuss three of the main theories of democracy that have guided scholarly literature on political and communication sciences in Latin America, namely, the theory of democracy proposed by the French scholars of pragmatism (Cefaï, 2009; Quéré and Terzi, 2015), heirs of the thought of the American philosopher John Dewey (2004); the studies on deliberative and digital democracy (Davis and Chandler, 2012; Lusoli, 2013) inspired by the theory of communicative action of Jürgen Habermas (1997); and more specifically, the scholars of civil society in Latin America, who praised the re-democratization movements from 1970 onwards in a period of decline of dictatorship regimes in these countries (Cohen and Arato, 1994). Then, we recover the contributions of moral philosophy to sustain that the claims for civic forms of participation made by far-right groups needed to be normatively evaluated as manifestations of a vengeful resentment. Furthermore, we situate historically the rise of right-wing movements in Brazil to develop our critical discourse analysis of the Facebook pages of the three rightist groups studied. Our aim is to highlight how the research on democratic participation in the digital society will be benefited from the recognition of the noxious moral emotions expressed in the claims of undemocratic activists, strategically engaged with the normative grammar of democratic citizenship.

² In a literal translation: Free Brazil Movement, Come to the Street!, and Movement against Corruption. Throughout this paper, we will adopt the Portuguese names of these groups.

1. Literature review

1.1. *The idealisation of civic action in three theories of democracy*

To reflect upon how the civic action has been related to the progress of democracy, we critically recover three major trends of contemporary democratic thought largely influential in studies in digital democracy in Latin America (Mendonça, 2011): the classical pragmatism of John Dewey (2004) recently retrieved by a group of French scholars; the Habermasian deliberative turn in critical theory; and the literature about the civil society built on the seminal work of Cohen and Arato (1994). These three approaches to liberal democracy have a relationship with each other: in the last decades, the pragmatist thought has been recovered by several scholars as a central contribution to the mature reflections of Habermas (Pogrebinschi, 2004; Mendonça, 2013, 2016). Also, we found echoes of Habermasian thoughts in the classical theorization of civil society developed by Cohen and Arato (1994), mainly in their accounts on civic association and political participation.

First of all, from a pragmatist angle, advanced by the paradigmatic work of Dewey (2004), the democratic project has been normatively guided by faith on popular self-government and in the systematic citizen participation. From this point of view, these two tenets could foment the collective resolution of public problems, the expression of fundamental values (e.g., freedom and equality), and the procedural reinvention of institutions. Democracy, from a pragmatist viewpoint, is an ethical ideal that surpasses a specific government and establishes itself on the “common man” inventiveness (Pogrebinschi, 2004). Dewey’s primary concern is centred upon the possible loss of collective wisdom by the emergence of industrial societies in the 20th century – which, by his view, fragment the public experience and restrain the means of civic participation in the advantage of representative mechanisms. So, promoting the emergence of the “Great Community” (Dewey, 2004) on liberal governments would be a step to improve the citizens’ pathways to exercise their communicative action and to handle their disagreements by cooperation based on mutual respect. Consequently, the solution to the malfunction of democratic governments will always be civic assemblage. Citizens can seek practical solutions to their collective problems when they have the right to express their arguments (Dewey, 2004; Mendonça, 2016). In these circumstances, they learn how to use the reflective action, reciprocally internalizing the intentions of each other and the dispositions of their community.

For the French pragmatists who inherited Dewey’s thought, civic participation is the gear of the procedural improvement of democracies. Therefore, it is not surprising that the faith in the virtues of civic action persists in their studies regarding contemporary public experience (Cefai, 2009). These scholars rarely raise doubts on the pragmatist assumption that civic participation is the central axis of democratic citizenship. As a result, risks of undemocratic drifts on liberal governments are treated as minor irregularities that could be corrected by the insertion of those noxious forces on democratic milestones (Cefai, 2003). In this sense, the vitality of the pragmatist ideal would remain intact. Recently, some scholars have raised blunt criticisms toward this literature. On the one hand, they point to the fact that problematic situations do not always lead to virtuous public mobilization to repair injustices. In some cases, resentments emanated from brutal events could bring “unproductive violence” (Stavo-Debaugé, 2012) to the citizens affected by those experiences. On the other hand, the democratization of public experience does not be

guaranteed by the simple emergence of ‘communities of inquiry’ since the public assemblages often do not achieve the high standards of ‘collective enlightenment’ postulated by pragmatist thought. In many times, these public gatherings (increasingly planned on digital spheres) are undermined by negative emotions (like the widespread hatred) (Queré and Terzi, 2015).

Also anchored on the theoretical assumption that civic action is responsible for the maintenance of a vigorous democratic sphere is the work of Habermas, the most significant scholar of the second generation of German Critical Theory. The civil society is seen as a vehicle to contain the instrumental rationality embodied by the State and the Market, and as a “sounding board” of social problems staged by communicative actions (Habermas, 1997). Amongst Habermas’ contributions to deliberative democracy, the most relevant ones are similar to pragmatist thought: a) he does not reduce democracy to specific governments, as popular sovereignty built on democratic modes of decision-making is the central axis of the deliberative process; b) he develops a discursive model of politics centred on collective reflection, linking discourse and reason; c) he acknowledges the pluralism of perspectives in instances of public discussion as well as the multiplicity of decentred arenas (Mendonça, 2016).

The normative assumption that connects democracy with communicative action enrolled in the social world resounds in several studies aligned with the deliberative perspective. For instance, some scholars have tracked down the expression of the popular sovereignty in institutional forums of public debate (Sampaio, Maia, and Marques, 2011) while others have focused on social media conversations (Kies, 2010). However, in these studies, the aim was to seek democratic uses of the platforms, excluding incivility and other noxious manifestations of what Quandt (2018) calls “dark participation.” In the most famous trend of that literature, i.e., the research on digital democracy (or e-democracy) (Lusoli, 2013), the chief endeavour is to frame the empirical findings in the normative landmarks of deliberation (e.g., rationality, equality, transparency, inclusiveness, reciprocity, and reflexivity). Consequently, on research about online public polls aiming new legislations (Rossini, 2014), or focused on the platforms’ conversational affordances (Davies and Chandler, 2012; Maia *et al.*, 2015), there is an inclination to disregard contrary evidence to the deliberation theoretical milestone - such as the “digital divide” regarding technologies of communication, the high specialisation of audiences involved in public debates, the uneven power in the hands of the social media platforms, and the rise of trolls, social bots and extremists on virtual forums (Maia, 2008; Maia *et al.*, 2015).

Finally, in Latin America, there is one more scholarly trend that has praised democratic citizenship. That literature has spread amidst the political turmoil of the 70s’ in the continent due to the hard transition from military dictatorship to democratic governments (Avritzer, 1997; Lavalle, 2002; Mendonça, 2011). In that context, the concept of civil society proposed by Cohen and Arato (1994) was a valuable resource to analyse the political changes experienced by these countries, including the renewal of the public sphere and civic participation. According to these scholars, an autonomous and critical civil society is crucial to the consolidation of democracy, promoting political reforms “from the bottom.” In *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cohen and Arato (1994) contend that democratic potential of civil society lies in the promotion of a “transversal communication” which makes feasible the emergence of public discussion forums and equalitarian forms of solidarity established through communication. In this way, the civic associations would express the collective joint of the public will.

The seminal work of Cohen and Arato has resonated on current Latin-American research on public participation of civil society, developed following the years of democratisation. Avritzer (2015) highlights the relevance of civil society to grasp the rebound of social ties of the poorest and middle class in these countries, who engaged in defence of civil rights. Between the 1990s and the 2000s, a new standpoint concerning the innovative forms of association of the Latin-American social movements was put forward (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar, 1998), challenging the historical inequalities in institutional and communicative fields. As Lavalle (2002) indicates, those studies were built on an excessive idealisation of civic modes of participation in the public sphere, neglecting the heterogeneity of civil society and its entrenched hierarchies in countries marked by astonishing levels of inequality (Avritzer, 2015).

To sum up, our brief literature review to three of the most influential theories of democracy in Latin America revealed a trend to idealising the civic association on public arenas, addressed as a virtuous instance of political participation. The contrary evidence to this milestone did not unsettle its core assumptions. Following Mendonça (2011), the civil sphere is generally recognised as the central axis that reinvigorates political life, which goes against the sway of the State and the Market. Moreover, it is understood as a creative and solidary strength that shows itself within injustice experiences – coupled with the right resentment, which culminates in disputes against the hegemonic power. However, the dramatic expansion of undemocratic groups in Western democracies leads us to cast doubts on those virtuous approaches to democracy. How could we stay sustaining the inseparability of political participation and the democratic improvement when we continuously come across extremist groups laid on a vengeful resentment against minorities and progressive agendas (Brighi, 2016; Kattago, 2017)?

1.2. The sources of resentment

In contrast to the idealisation of the ethical virtues of civil society on collective experience, we propose the densification of these claims to include the description of reactionary worldviews and harmful moral emotion. As abovementioned, several scholars on democratic theory point to the fact that public participation is based on strong emotional experiences that pave the way to claims for justice. These experiences often precede the cognitive expression of complaints and qualify some situations as disturbs to the moral expectations of individuals and their callings for justice. Strictly speaking, we also could characterise the emotions that pervade these circumstances as resentment in a Smithian outlook (Smith, 1990).

In this approach, recently recovered by the moral philosophy (Fassin, 2013; Ure, 2015; Brighi, 2016), resentment is a reaction to suffering impinged by real or imaginary agents. Its manifestation does not aim to rematch an endured disrespect (in a vengeful reaction) but to repair torts by the acknowledgement of the injustices inflicted on a group. However, as described by Ure (2015) “resentment is not merely concerned with individual self-esteem, wounded honour, or recognition, but also with the identification and protection of shared norms that regulate social and political relationships” (p. 600). For this reason, the victims can overcome or at least assimilate the resentment through communicative actions - which restore their self-esteem and their belief in normative order. Taking into consideration that resentment is a “justice guardian” in this theorisation; it is not unfounded to consider it a supporter of democratic citizenship.

Nevertheless, the most prominent finding in these philosophical retrievals to the resentment is the elucidation of its ambivalence. That is, the same emotion that leads to virtuous civic actions is also capable to put in motion a vengeful spiral where the calling for repair is replaced by the identification of “scapegoats” blamed for real or imaginary torts. In this Nietzschean approach to the resentment (or *ressentiment*, since some scholars have been using the French term to refer to this noxious emotion) (Brown, 1993; Fassin, 2013; Ure, 2015; Brighi, 2016; Kattago, 2017), the tort is purged only by virulent waves of rancour against the blamed ones, identified as “enemies.” Without the faith in democratic mechanisms to rectify the alleged injustices suffered, these experiences are irrevocably negative and elicit dangerous suspicions against everyone in the out-group. Feelings of powerlessness in the face of a given situation are then replaced by a disregard of the democratic modes of decision-making. Thus, there is an encouragement to authoritarian groups who request an apparently lost sovereignty as compensation to their current fragility (Brown, 1993; Ure, 2015).

Therefore, the double face of resentment shows the complexity of moral emotions expressed in collective action. As civil society is not intrinsically virtuous, sometimes even its noblest intentions could be undermined by pernicious resentment, turning justice claims into pure retaliation (Brown, 1993; Brown, 2016; Ure, 2016). It is important to note that the analytical distinction suggested here between forms of resentment is usually enmeshed in the real world, as we will show in our historical account regarding the demonstrations of civil society in Brazil from 2013 to 2018. Sometimes, systematic institutional disregard for citizens’ claims can slide to diffuse blame and the refusal of repair proposals. Further, the group can gradually shut itself off (in online and offline environments) from the external world into “echo chambers” (Bruns, 2019), reinforcing its most distorted worldviews and blaming everyone for its supposed suffering.

2. The rise of far-right demonstrations in Brazil

The scholarly literature regarding the current political turmoil in Brazil is unanimous in acknowledging the surge of conservative groups amidst the impeachment trial of former President Dilma Rousseff, which began in 2015 and ended in 2016 (Tatagiba *et al.*, 2015; Avritzer, 2017). This trial has shown the weakness of Brazilian democracy and contributed to the comeback of hegemonic elites to the government (especially the far-right ones). Tatagiba *et al.* (2015) indicate that 2015 was a particularly exemplary year, in which took place the first massive public demonstration of the right-wing activists since the 1980s. According to Tatagiba (2017), the far-right rise in Brazil is intrinsically linked to the boost of conservative demonstrations from 2011 to 2015 – although minor conservative protests occurred in the early 2000s.

The turning point of the upsurge of far-right in Brazil was the sweeping protests of June 2013, initiated with the leadership of Free Fare Movement (*Movimento Passe Livre*), a local entity that advocated for free public transportation in São Paulo, the largest city in Brazil. As described by Singer (2013), those public outcries, digitally organised, offered an opportunity to a new joint of the middle-class and its conservative agenda, such as the hardening of anti-corruption measures and the abolishment of income redistribution policies. For those middle-class demonstrators, the social redistributive justice in Brazil was seen as an impediment to economic development (Avritzer, 2017). As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the unrest of

June 2013 left activists were the largest group in the demonstrations, but this changed since the conservative middle-class had increased their participation in those public outcries, crossing their neoliberal agendas with the progressive ones (Singer, 2013). In that context, the most radical protesters of middle-class groups paved the way to the resurgence of far-right in Brazil, build on their hatred toward the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*) that ruled the country between 2003 and 2016 and had been involved in corruption scandals (Tatagiba, 2014). Those citizens related these scandals with the maintenance of Workers' Party income and wealth redistribution policies, expressing their diffuse malaise against Brazil's political system (Singer, 2013).

In a historical account of the socio-political order in Brazil, Kaysel (2015) pinpoints the permanent presence of right-wing groups aligned with political and economic elites, especially during the military dictatorship in Brazil that lasted from 1964 to 1985. Even in the democratization period, after the farewell of the last military President, the hegemonic progressive ideals shared the stage with conservative groups (Avritzer, 1997). According to Gentile (2018), until 2013 Brazilian right-wing networks have been neglected by the scholarly literature in political and social sciences, above all by its faith in virtues of civil society to the improvement of democracy. The roots of Brazilian right emanate from the authoritarian thoughts of the sociologist Oliveira Vianna in the 1920s, and the unusual marriage between neoliberalism and militarism of the 1950s. The tension between liberalism and authoritarianism which nurtures those uncivil movements is currently expressed in three major trends: The Pentecostalism, the neoliberal think tanks, and the followers of the extreme right politician Jair Bolsonaro, a former congressman elected to be the 38th President of Brazil (Gentile, 2018).

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that a large number of studies centred in tracking down the rise of the "new far-right" in Brazil (Messenberg, 2017; dos Santos and Chagas, 2018) adopt a descriptive approach, revealing a bit of perplexity given the boost of groups which mixes their hate against the Workers' Party with a moral conservatism and neoliberal worldviews. Those studies often fall under their lack of concern with the moral and affective components of right-wing activism. In our view, the astonishment of several scholars regarding the current upsurge of far-right in Brazil could be explained by two reasons: first, their failure to consider the historical roots of undemocratic worldviews in Brazil (firstly discussed by Pierucci (1987) and Gonzaga (2000)); and second, due to their epistemological resistance to analyse these movements with the same landmarks which they use to study the most progressive ones. This theoretical limitation has been heading some scholars to cast suspicious on the civic engagement of some of those right-wing activists, blamed to be funded by liberal think tanks and international donors (e.g., the Atlas Network) (Messenberg, 2017; dos Santos and Chagas, 2018). However, as we showed, this argument merely explains the organisational infrastructure of Brazilian right-wing groups but does not clarify the reasons behind their striking popularity.

We contend that the key to grasping this "new wave" of far-right protesters in Brazil is by delving into the moral emotions expressed in their discourses. As we discuss in the next section, these agents often voice their claims through a vengeful resentment against democratic citizenship - disguised as just indignation.

2.1. Methods

Our empirical endeavour within the universe of self-entitled conservative movements started form an inspection of their leading representatives, tracked down through online search engines. Our first step was to identify the central leaders of

conservative protests in Brazil between 2014 and 2016, searching them in news media reports from the most prominent days of street protests: 15th November 2014; 15th March, 12th April, 16th August, and 13th December 2015; and 13th March 2016. As a result, we found four main groups: *Movimento Brasil Livre* (MBL), *Vem Pra Rua*, *Movimento Contra Corrupção* (MCC), and *Revoltados Online*, responsible for organising and promoting street protests, and for disseminating the far-right worldview. To confirm our findings, we sought out for three keywords in online search engines – “Brazilian right-wing”, “Brazilian extreme right groups”, and “Brazilian conservative coalition” – and compared the results with our first search.

The four central conservative movements in Brazil emerged in the context of Operation Car Wash (*Operação Lava Jato*), a set of investigations into money laundering and political and corporate racketeering in Brazil started in March 2014³. The operation revealed corruption schemes involving important members of Workers’ Party administration, causing popular uprising throughout the country. Along with the political crises, the operation triggered sociocultural instability that questioned the values and morals instituted during the 14 years of Workers’ Party government (Tatagiba *et al.*, 2015). This process generated a profound political and social polarisation that leveraged the surge and development of the conservative groups (Tatagiba, 2017). About mid-2013 and 2014, young Brazilians around age 30 gathered together and founded the four prominent right-wing collectives, articulating street protests. Promptly, they became trustworthy spokespeople of conservative citizens. The four conservative groups cemented their role as political leaderships in 2016, during Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment trials. In this context, they presented themselves as the genuine representatives of the Brazilian people in contrast to the elected government. After the end of the conservative demonstrations in Brazil in 2018, these four groups remained articulated, seeking to run for the national elections that took place that year⁴.

Once we located the four main groups, we searched for their pages on social media, centralizing Facebook⁵, which is the space where they build a public profile, share their ideas, call for street demonstrations, and debate national politics. To develop our analysis, we opted to select the first three movements due to their capillarity in social media (i.e. their ability to gather followers) and their primary importance of mobilizing the far-right⁶. In Figure 1, we present the three selected movements and their Facebook profile components.

³ For more details, see: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-35810578>

⁴ MBL launched Kim Kataguire as federal deputy and *Vem Pra Rua* launched Rogério Chequer as a candidate for governor of São Paulo in the 2018 national elections.

⁵ We do not analyse Twitter, Whatsapp, and Instagram because Facebook is the most important social network for these far-right groups, as it subsidizes publications that go on other media. Also, Facebook is the main space to start debates, mobilizing followers’ participation.

⁶ *Revoltados Online* has only 2.964 followers and maintains a low level of likes and shares (2.823) when compared to the other three groups. Moreover, their posts are similar to the MCC and do not present additional data to the study.

Fig. 1 - Profile components of the three main self-entitled conservative movements in Brazil

<i>Movements</i>	<i>Number of followers</i>	<i>Founding date</i>	<i>Main themes discussed</i>	<i>Self-description</i>
MBL	3.330.925	November 2014	Institutional policy and government corruption.	“An entity that aims to mobilize Brazilian citizens in favour of a free, just, and prosperous society.”
<i>Vem Pra Rua</i>	2.358.426	November 2014	Institutional policy and government corruption.	“Our motto is the democracy, ethics in politics, and an efficient and minimum State.”
MCC	3.559.593	June 2013	Institutional policy and government corruption.	“This group believes that Brazil will only become a first world country when its citizens fight against government corruption.”

Source: own authorship

In the second stage of our analysis, we observed the postings of the three conservative movements on their Facebook profile. For inspection, we considered only the posts made on their founding date (June 2013 to MCC and November 2014 to MBL and *Vem Pra Rua*) and on the months of the central extreme right’s demonstrations in Brazil (March, April, and August 2015; March and August 2016; March and September 2017). We also observed the posts range from April to July 2018, the period of the last street protests of right-wing groups⁷. Our goal in observing entire months was to reconstruct the development of these groups along the time, apprehending their central strategies for civic engagement and their worldview. To define our analytical corpus, we selected only self-made posts, excluding those that share news from newspapers or magazines, request donations, announce local and dates of street protests, and promote polls. By the end, our corpus encompassed 468 posts, distributed as shown in Figure 2.

Fig. 2 - The number of posts by selected movement and periods

<i>Posts by periods/Movements</i>	<i>MBL</i>	<i>Vem Pra Rua</i>	<i>MCC</i>
Founding dates	3	20	12
March, April, and August 2015	10	33	43
March and August 2016	10	52	23
March and September 2017	11	63	2
April to July 2018	21	117	48
Total	55	285	128

Source: own authorship.

⁷ We selected these crucial periods considering the diagnosis of Tatagiba (2017) about the major demonstrations of Brazilian right-wing groups. We included the four months of 2018 because they represent the end of the right-wing’s mass street protests, which decreased after the arrest of former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on April 7, 2018, condemned for corruption and money laundering by the Operation Car Wash.

The methodology for analysing the posts was the critical discourse analysis (CDA), understood as a tool to develop a contextual and critical examination of the everyday utterances (Van Dijk, 1993). This method helps to locate the role and function of speeches in the process of producing and sharing meanings. Furthermore, the CDA is a means to apprehend the moral universes of discourses, constituting itself as a mechanism of judgment and discernment of the symbolical organisation of the social world. The analytical procedures employed were developed from Khosravini and Unger's (2015) guidelines, authors who have discussed the usage of CDA to study social media. The basis of their guidelines is a three-step investigation that grasps the central aspects of social media utterances, generally compound of short sentences. The first step is the contextualization of discourses, indicating who their authors are and where they circulate. The second step is to identify the most recurring speech topics, verifying the terms and expressions most used and their meanings in the discursive context. The last step is to discern the audience summoned by the speech, considering how discourses establish their imagined interlocutors. At the end of these three steps, it is possible to formulate a critical examination of the utterances on social media, grasping their configuration and arrangement.

2.2. Results

We begin the CDA by examining how the three selected conservative movements present themselves in the online environment, looking at the organisation and arrangement of their Facebook profiles. This initial analysis helped us to understand the right-wing groups' dynamics and the background of their utterances. MBL is undoubtedly the most organized and structured far-right collective, replicating the aesthetics of a corporate enterprise in its Facebook profile. This group developed a personal brand that displays its political motto: a background image of the conservative street demonstrations with the MBL logo and the phrase "for a freer Brazil" in the front position. MBL concentrates its postings in denouncing corruption scandals and fraudulent politicians, centrally blaming the improbity of Workers' Party administration and the left-wing political project. Other posts expose the contradictions of minority groups, such as Feminism, Black Movement, and Landless Movement, considered "leftists". MBL always emphasizes in its discourses its republican and democratic stance, repudiating what it considers as expressions of fascism and militarism. This movement always tries to ground its speeches in news reports, aiming to prove its seriousness and social responsibility when producing comments on political events. *Vem Pra Rua* Facebook profile, in turn, is less professional than that of MBL, being less effective in building its brand and in organizing its postings. This collective does not have a proper logotype, employing images of the conservative demonstrations (in which everyone wears green and yellow clothes) as its brand. Like MBL, *Vem Pra Rua* comments on political and corporate corruption in its postings, using news media reports to base its discourses. Besides, this collective defends the fight against "Brazilian leftists" and Workers' Party administration. Unlike MBL, *Vem Pra Rua* also dedicates its Facebook profile to check judicial condemnations of Brazilian politicians and to disseminate far-right worldview, debating sociocultural and moral issues.

In opposition to the other two movements, MCC has an amateurish profile, without visual brand and postings organisation. This group rarely shares news reports and bases its speeches in postings of other conservative movements. Its social me-

dia posts continuously express indignation and outrage, employing a denunciation tone. MCC frequently publishes hate and sectary discourses against social minorities, revealing the symbolic ground of Brazilian extreme right. In this sense, the denouncement of government corruption shares space with the disclosure of the far-right worldview. While MBL and *Vem Pra Rua* seek to keep their moral values hidden, centralizing posts against corruption and in favour of democracy, MCC exposes the alt-right beliefs, openly showing the antidemocratic foundations of its claims.

The second step of the CDA analysis was to establish the main speech topics of the three conservative groups, categorizing their social media postings. To develop this examination, we gathered the 468 posts and separated them by their main themes. After that, we analysed the tags attributed to the posts, establishing five topics that represent the main emphasis of the speeches: the first one is called “political action”, which describes the modes of political engagement of the conservative groups; the second one is the “self-representation”, which says about the self-definition of the three collectives; the third one is the “demands,” which shows the central political aims of the movements; the fourth one is the “speech audience” that details the public of extreme right’s discourses; the last one is the “moral values,” which outlines the morals and principles defended by the far-right. These five topics pinpoint to the most crucial discursive frames that ground the presence of the far-right in Brazil. In Figure 3, we display the number of postings in each of the five topics. In this first access to the data, we discerned the posts by the three collectives, trying to understand what the discursive emphasis of each group is. However, in the analysis of the utterances, we opted for not distinguish the statements by the three movements because, in most cases, we found identical postings. Moreover, we considered that the statements represent shared ideas of the far-right movements.

Fig. 3 - The main speech topics by selected movements

Groups/Topics	Political action	Self-representation	Demands	Moral Values	Speech Audience
MBL	17	14	16	3	5
<i>Vem Pra Rua</i>	89	52	66	31	47
MCC	3	11	14	53	47
Total of posts	109	77	96	87	99

Source: own authorship.

In the first topic, on political action, the groups make postings explaining their modes of participation in the public sphere, trying to affirm their importance and centrality to move forward the Brazilian civil society. Their discourses establish an interpretation of active citizenship, attached to their modalities of public outcries. To MBL and *Vem Pra Rua* this is a central topic, corresponding to 30% and 31% of their posts respectively. Demonstrations, protests, popular movements, and civil mobilizations are keywords in the postings within political action topic, classifying and framing the conservative movements’ modes of public engagement, all of them considered “plural, diverse, and democratic⁸.” Supposedly anchored in democratic

⁸ Henceforward, all the words or phrases under quotation marks were reproduced from MBL, *Vem Pra Rua*, and MCC Facebook pages.

prerogatives, the three groups designate their assemblages as “spontaneous associations,” claiming for the right to free association and civic engagement. They justify their existence as political groups as a “genuine civic act of fighting for Brazil.” Accordingly, their utterances point to an idea of civic participation that legitimates and justifies their demonstrations and claims. For these groups, they are promoting “peaceful and organized demonstrations” that respect democratic and republican principles. Their public outcries are considered as “patriotic, pluralist, constitutional, civic, non-partisan, and legitimate,” a result of “vigilant citizenship.”

The speeches on political action are related to the roles the three groups attribute to themselves in the Brazilian public sphere. MBL affirms its aspiration to restore the democratic regime in Brazil, which would have been eroded by the Workers’ Party government. Ceaselessly trumpeting his motto “neither communism nor militarism,” MBL denounces the alleged twelve-year communist dictatorship instituted by the Workers’ Party administration, the “greatest thieves of the country.” It would be up to the Brazilian people represented through conservative groups to “proclaim the republic and freedom,” and to strengthen “the decency that remains in our democracy.” Moreover, it should be done through “spontaneous demonstrations,” which must be based on “law and order,” and “democracy and freedom.” For *Vem Pra Rua* and MCC, in turn, the protests promoted by conservative collectives are an essential endeavour, given the fact that Brazil was living a “coup d’état carried out by Workers’ Party,” which has furthered the privileges of allied politicians and social minority movements, especially the Brazilian Landless Movement (MST). In this sense, these groups define themselves as the protectors and guardians of the Brazilian society, responsible for guaranteeing its development.

The second speech topic is related to the first one, insofar as it presents the self-representation of the three selected groups that supports the discourses on their social roles and modes of political action. This topic describes and frames the public presence of the conservative collectives, who call themselves as “civic assemblages” and “political movements.” MBL defines itself as “the democratic resistance of freedom” that exists to fight for a “freer Brazil.” This group sees itself as the “legitimate actor” to assert Brazilian people claims, fighting for a “just and democratic society.” *Vem Pra Rua* recognizes itself as a “civic and political movement,” responsible for mobilizing the opposition to the Workers’ Party government. This collective declares itself as a ‘spontaneous organisation of civil society’, which seeks to promote “civic education” and “the assemblage of central groups of Brazilian civil society,” aiming to enable a “predominant posture towards the real needs of our society, foreclosing the privileges of powerful minorities.” MCC, in turn, sees itself as “the protector of the motherland,” accountable for “denouncing and revealing corruption scandals” in Brazil. So, MCC declares itself as a collective aimed to “inform the Brazilian population,” raising “awareness of national political issues.” MCC proclaims itself as a “civic and plural organisation” that promotes “citizenship and political means of participation” to the Brazilian people. This group acts as both an “observatory of political events” and a “modality of political mobilization.” The three groups attribute an emphasis on their self-representation, but MBL is the most emphatic one, dedicating a quarter of their postings to this issue. In contrast, *Vem Pra Rua* dedicated 18% of its postings to the matter and MCC only 8%.

The third topic is about the conservative movements’ political demands, which are the justification of their demonstrations. This topic reunites discourses on the objectives and motivations of the conservative groups. MBL and *Vem Pra Rua* stand out in this matter, since 29% and 23% of their speeches address the de-

mands. For understanding the primary demands of the Brazilian far-right groups it is essential to look at the central questions debated in their Facebook pages. The conservative collectives gather themselves around central issues, among which government corruption and impunity stand out, practices supposedly institutionalized in Workers' Party administrations. Furthermore, other questions, as the alleged "state burden" caused by a large number of state-owned companies and social programs, have centrality in their debates, trying to trace the causes of the corrosion of Brazilian democracy. In their utterances, the minimum state intervention and the privatisation of state-owned companies are safe ways to "resume Brazil's prosperity," assuming a "compromise with freedom, justice, and democratic institutions, repudiating any attempt to corrupt these three pillars of prosperity." Another pungent matter to the extreme right is the supposed "communist dictatorship" that would have been established in the country, responsible for awakening disparities among Brazilian citizens, creating a social fissure, preventing joint actions, and destabilizing social ties. For them, a democratic government should "unite Brazilians, recognizing every person as an independent citizen." All these appeals have animated right-wing protests and their online postings, discussing both the political-institutional context (trying to formulate what they understand as a democratic regime) and the socio-cultural terrain (attempting to recover the "basilar values of Brazilian nation"). At this point, it is crucial to highlight the distinct public stance of the three groups. Notwithstanding the coincidence of participatory strategies and public claims, MBL attempts to maintain a moderate and cautious posture, hiding in a veil of "objective demands" addressed to the State, while *Vem Pra Rua* and MCC openly expose their desire to "moralize Brazilian culture," based on the "rescue of the true public spirit of Brazil."

The main request of the four groups is the establishment of the minimum State. In addition to the support of total privatisation of state-owned companies, they require "the end of minority privileges" by instituting the principle of *meritocracy*.⁹ The meritocracy means, in practical terms, ending the quota policy that establishes racial and social quotas to access public universities and civil service exams. For them, quota holders are "parasites of the State." Also, they claim for the closure of the public higher education system, since public universities are "contaminated by communism and left-wing ideologies." The privatisation should also encompass strategic sectors, such as public health services and all state-owned enterprises, with the purpose of "alleviating State costs." Furthermore, it is fundamental to these movements ending social policies of income redistribution, promoting the "emancipation of Brazilian people" and "free competition." These demands represent their aspiration for a complete revision of the Constitutions' economic section, preventing the State from interfering in the market.

Another claim is the criminalization of some social movements, in particular, the black movement (that would be "perpetuating racism and subordination"), the feminism (that would be spreading a "gender ideology"), and the landless movement (considered as terrorists who invades private property and violate individual rights). Along with this agenda, the far-right collectives demand the extinction of participatory forums and popular councils, presumably controlled by those social movements with government money. We should also consider the incessant request

⁹ One of the main agendas of Workers Party government (2003-2016) was the fight against social inequality through public policies of economic redistribution, which aimed at reducing extreme poverty establishing an emergency income, facilitating access to housing, and implementing a quota policy for low-income and black students to enter public universities.

for a) the annulment of disarmament statute, which would be favouring criminals, b) the approval of School Without Party projects¹⁰, aiming to “contain communist and socialist indoctrination” in schools, c) the introduction of the death penalty in Brazilian law, d) a modification in Abortion Law, criminalizing abortion in all circumstances, and e) the end Rouanet Law, named “Roubanet¹¹” by the conservative groups.

Finally, it is paramount to comment on the claims for the return of a military dictatorship that has always emerged in the right-wing demonstrations. We highlight that officially MBL and *Vem Pra Rua* repudiate totalitarian governments, although these groups continually stress the patriotism and the love for the Brazilian flag (appealing to the exaltation of its symbols and colours) in all their protests. In contrast, MCC, a collective less inclined to run for municipal and national elections, expresses its inclination towards a military regime, understood as an efficient way to “straighten out” Brazil – that means to “fix” last government errors and centralize conservative values. Many of MCC postings salute generals and their intransigent stance, which would be necessary for the re-education of Brazilians, and affirm the “meritocracy value” present in militarism. According to MCC, “whoever is afraid of the military government is corrupt and immoral,” because “the armed forces are on the citizens’ side and will protect Brazilian people”. Several postings demand the establishment of the military dictatorship, arguing that the Constitution foresees the legality of this political regime. The following sentence currently synthesizes this idea: “democratically request for a military administration.”

The fourth topic is on the moral values, showing the conservative anchorage of the three selected groups. In this topic, the postings are centrally about an imagined Brazilian society, considered dignified and virtuous. It articulates all the other four topics since it establishes the argumentative and moral basis of the conservative collectives. MCC is the most prominent group on this matter, dedicating 41% of its postings to present the conservative values. In contrast, MBL and *Vem Pra Rua* dedicate only 5% and 10% of its postings respectively. The movements studied by this investigation are self-proclaimed conservatives because this is the worldview that supports their argumentative horizons. The defence of this stance is based on a purportedly need to recover “Brazil’s primary values” and to establish “shared ethical references” for the entire population, “rescuing Brazilian morality.” For these groups, the Workers’ Party government would have destroyed “not only the economy, but also the morality, the institutions, and the pride of being Brazilian.” Trying to change this situation of “political and socio-cultural chaos,” it would be necessary to revitalize “family values” (based on father, mother, and children) and to interrupt the agendas regarding gender minorities. Patriotism is another critical point to these collectives, sustained by respect for traditional Brazilian institutions, especially religion, family, and authority. In the discourses of the three collectives, the conservative moral needs to be restored to re-establish the equality between the

¹⁰ It is a set of bills that began to be proposed in Brazil around 2015, whose objective is to prevent a supposed “ideological indoctrination” in schools. It defines the limits of teachers’ performance inside classes, who should not express their personal opinions in the classroom. Additionally, it predicts that only parents have the prerogative to define the religious education of their children, without the involvement of schools.

¹¹ The main instrument for promoting cultural production, the Law 8.313, better known as Rouanet, was created in 1991. For right-wing movements, this law is responsible for “burden” the State, handing over funds to “bandits” and “rioters” (the artists). “Roubanet” is a union of Rouanet with the word “steal” in Portuguese (*roubar*).

Brazilians, because “we are all equal, and we have to have the same rights.” According to them, Workers’ Party promoted a “split-up of Brazilian citizens” insofar as it gave privileges to social minorities. It is up to the conservative citizens to recover the parity of participation in the public sphere. Only after these socio-political transformations, Brazil would possibly be a society that “respect and honour its citizens,” granting a proper treatment to the national elite, “since it is a decent elite what the country needs, an elite that honour hardworking Brazilian people.” In these discourses, the extreme right collectives affirm the conservative worldview centrality for the Brazilian society, a worldview that supposedly advances the development of a “decent and honourable society.”

The last topic is about the audience that the speeches address. It is about an idealised Brazilian people that correspond only to the conservative citizens. This topic is central to MCC, who dedicated 36% of its postings to define the “genuine” Brazilian citizens. *Vem Pra Rua* devoted 16% of its postings to the issue, while MBL reserved only 9%. The analysis of this final topic closes our CDA endeavour since it evidences the imagined public of the conservative collectives in their Facebook postings. The three extreme right groups assert their legitimacy and significance crying systematically out for the “authentic Brazilian people,” who would be duly represented in their civic associations. The validity and credibility of their protests have to do with the significant presence of Brazilian citizens, which goes beyond the “white elite.” For these right-wing collectives, the Brazilian people would be constituted by “the honest and good reputed Brazilians, who preach family values and are true patriots.” These specific strata of citizens are recognized as “decent, honourable, and noble Brazilians,” and they represent the “peaceful and ethical protesters” who truly fight to restore democracy in Brazil, as opposed to the “vagrants and scoundrels” who were in defence of the corrupt government. What the far-right collectives understand as “Brazilian people” corresponds to a specific stratum of the population, precisely those who engage in their public outcries demanding the end of government corruption, the overthrow of the Workers’ Party (considered “the looters of the homeland”), and the return of the legitimate democracy found on the interests, demands, and desires of the conservative people. The careful selection of who could be considered as citizen supports the presumed democratic stance of the three groups, who would be responsible for “representing the interests of Brazilian people.”

2.3. Discussion

The analysis highlighted the discursive strategies employed by the three most influential conservative groups in Brazil, revealing how they use social media to assert their importance and centrality to the Brazilian society. Throughout the five topics, the three groups build up an idea of democracy and civic participation that places them in the centre of the Brazilian public sphere. The collectives mobilize the two first topics to affirm their democratic forms of public engagement and to demonstrate their anchorage to the republican principles. However, when they enunciate their demands (in the third topic), it becomes clear that they promote a twist in the notion of democracy, claiming it only to declare the validity and legitimacy of their antidemocratic requests. This antidemocratic stance becomes evident when we examine the fourth and fifth topics, where the three movements express their moral values and their proper audience. In these two topics, they reveal their desire to re-establish the sovereignty of the conservative Brazilians in the public sphere, eliminating their opponents, i.e., the social minority groups. In the three collectives’ discourses, the Workers’ Party administration provoked a mutation in the political and social arenas that favoured social minorities’ (“false Brazi-

lian people”) aspirations and disfavoured social majorities’ (‘true Brazilian people’) requests. In sum, the analysis reveals that the Brazilian conservative groups employ democratic means of civic participation but to advance antidemocratic demands, building up a divided Brazilian public sphere in which it is easy to find out the “motherland enemies” (i.e., the social minorities).

The configuration of the conservative movements’ speeches discloses a subtext that exposes the symbolic basis of the emergence of these groups: a moral emotion that articulates frustration and revenge against the state of affairs, the resentment. The resentment grounds the assemblage of the conservative people and feeds their ideas and demands, allowing the edification of national enemies and threats that must be eliminated. As the analysis shows, the extreme right collectives hold the Workers’ Party government accountable for Brazil’s political and moral degradation, since it established a “communist dictatorship” that privileged “vile ideologies and corrupted social groups.” For MBL, *Vem Pra Rua*, and MCC, the chaotic context of systematic government corruption and sociocultural deterioration testifies a distortion of the primary values of Brazil and the exclusion of the “real” Brazilian people (the conservative ones) of the public sphere. According to their speeches, before Workers’ Party administration Brazil experienced prosperous times when the principles of family, religion, and patriotism were central to the citizens’ everyday life. To fabricate their targets, the conservative groups call attention to the relation of Workers’ Party (their political opponent) with the Brazilian social movements (their sociocultural enemies).

When we put together the five topics discussed above, we can see more than a twist in democratic principles and practices, but a process of building a moral emotion that justifies and endorses the very presence of these movements in public arenas: the resentment (Brown, 1993). This moral emotion manifests itself in right-wing’s mobilizations as rancour and rage, as a means of revenge against those responsible for injustice and damages caused to the “genuine Brazilian people,” i.e. the conservative citizens. The desire for revenge breaks out as a reaction to frustration, leading to the search for reparative measures, such as “moralize institutions” or “endorse meritocracy,” which are firmly anchored in retaliation and punishment of the scapegoats. The resentment is, in this sense, an emotion developed within dominant groups as a reaction to the minorities (substantiating claims such as the end of social movements or their possibility to take part in public discussions), which reinforces animosities between these segments of the population (separating “true citizens” from “less-than-citizens”).

The resentment helps us to understand how these conservative collectives manage to naturalize and defend violence and discrimination practices, qualifying them as legitimate and even democratic. These movements, seeing themselves losing control of their privileged position and social hegemony, face the frustration of perceiving the loss of their advantages and the impossibility of recovering their social power. This type of resentment is expressed as discontent with the state of affairs, blaming certain social groups (most commonly those historically marginalized) for their loss of power. MBL, *Vem Pra Rua*, and MCC only promote street protests and feel free to publicize their worldview due to the generalization, in Brazil, of the resentment emotion, which allows them to promote antidemocratic claims anchored in purported democratic values.

Final Remarks

This investigation intended to outline an analytical and theoretical contribution by critically examining the political mobilizations of the far-right in Brazil. In empirical terms, this study advances research on the recent rise of Brazilian conserva-

tive groups. Beyond identifying the most active extreme right groups, we revealed the structuring of their discourses on social media, highlighting five main discursive topics that ground the political action of these collectives. We disclosed the relations between the five topics, showing how the modes of political action, the self-presentation, and the demands are subsumed to the conservative moral values and the imagined “genuine Brazilian people” (the audience of the discourses). We unveiled the conservative movements’ desire to restore a conservative morality in Brazil, which depends on political-institutional and sociocultural rearranging. This rearrangement is based on the criminalization of social minorities, the extinction of public policies of redistribution and recognition, and the establishment of a neoliberal government. Furthermore, this analysis testifies a subtext of the speeches, which is a moral emotion that channels the conservative collectives’ desire for revenge and retaliation: the resentment. This moral emotion reinforces a sense of shared injustice, which is responsible for the rapid expansion and the high popularity of these extreme right groups. Resentment synthesizes the stimulus for the conservative uprising in Brazil, being a means through which the extreme right movements could re-establish the sovereignty of the conservative citizen. Through the affirmation of their anchorage in democratic and republican principles, which is discursively demonstrated in their self-representation and their modes of political action, the three groups promote a twist in the democracy and republicanism by setting up demands based on exclusions and suppression of a portion of the Brazilian society. As a consequence of the moving from a democratic standard to the resentment, the far-right established a single public worth of occupying the national public sphere (“genuine Brazilian people”), who deserves broad participation in public arenas to promote revenge against their opponents (social minorities) and to restore the “Brazil’s’ decency and prosperity.”

Additionally, this research questioned a field of the democratic theory which reflects upon the formation of civic engagement arenas, arguing that they are not always supported by the claims which foresee repair of injustices – that is, they are not ever anchored in democratic ideals. It is essential to consider that our critical effort in this paper does not assert a sceptical reading of participatory democracy theory, not even purpose the hypertrophy of civic engagement mechanisms as a way of enclosing antidemocratic civil groups. Our goal was to deepen the understanding of the kinds of demands and requirements that come from civil society, shedding light on popular mobilisation forms contrary to progressive ideals, which work to erode civic forms of engagement. Given the rise of these conservative collectives in the West, we believe that it is worthy to critically examine their discourses, noticing how moral emotions, especially resentment, underline their attempts to instrumented democratic principles at the expense of democracy.

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