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RESEÑAS/NOTAS DE INVESTIGACIÓN

Bolsonarism, a Phenomenon that Surpasses the Messiah

Bolsonarismo, un fenómeno que supera al Mesías

■ Monteiro, Geraldo and Carlos Teixeira (2020) *Bolsonarismo: teoria e prática*.
Rio de Janeiro: Gramma Livraria & Editora ■

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Near the end of his first four-year term in office, there is still a lot to understand in how Jair Bolsonaro, once a mythological politician from the low clergy of the Chamber, openly authoritarian and without any previous experience in Executive, was elected to the highest office in one of, until then, most stable democracies in Latin America. An unprecedented phenomenon in Brazilian history that has generated several works, papers and research trying to understand the multifacets of this outsider who was not an outsider.

For Bolsonaro —and, consequently, Bolsonarism— is plural. It is a mistake to think that Bolsonaro and Bolsonarism are uniform, unison, a movement with a single explanation. It is a complex phenomenon on several fronts in a mostly inorganic and tense union that researchers will bend over for many years after it is long gone.

Hence the importance of a book such as *Bolsonarismo, teoria e prática* [*Bolsonarism, theory and practice*]. Multiple researchers exploring the multiple facets of this complex phenomenon, thus providing a broad overview of Bolsonarism. It is always more complicated to produce a review of a collection of articles than a book by a single author, given the distribution and breadth of ideas, but *Bolsonarism* is united by the attempt of the authors, members of the research groups Brazilian Center of Studies and Researches on Democracy (CEBRAD/UERJ) and Institutional Alternatives Laboratory (LAI/UFF), and Carlos Sávio Teixeira and Geraldo Tadeu Monteiro, the organizers, in exploring the process of democratic erosion applied by Bolsonaro.

The articles are dedicated to the different factions that compete within Bolsonarismo. For example, in the opening, Brand Arenari undertakes an archeology of what he calls

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“post-Catholic Brazil”, that is, the relationship between Bolsonarism and neo-charismatic religions. Bolsonaro, even though a Catholic, did not hesitate to draw closer to evangelical sectors, aware of the strength of this electorate. At this point, there is an intersection point between neo-charismatic and libertarian rhetoric, to mention two of the groups that support Bolsonarism: the theology of prosperity and the creation of the myth of the self-made man. The image of the entrepreneur and entrepreneurship, the apex of liberal individualism, finds symbiotic resonance within evangelical churches. An ideology that is useful and prone to the formation of a new country, a post-Catholic Brazil, with the parallel growth and weakening of Protestantism and Catholicism respectively. A theme that returns later, in an article by Joyce Lucas and William Magalhães, *The message and the herald*, in which the authors seek to understand, through divisions in semantic fields, some of the heterogeneous bases of support for Bolsonarism.

Arenari classifies Bolsonaro as “the first ‘evangelical’ president of Brazil” (Monteiro and Teixeira, 2020: 19). Putting “evangelical” in quotation marks because, at least theoretically, Bolsonaro claims to be Catholic. But, as a politician, the president is aware of the strength of the evangelical electorate in the Brazilian context, a portion that cannot be ignored. He beckons constantly to this base, as when he was baptized for the second

time in the River Jordan. Arenari thus talks about the ashes that form over the once-largest Catholic nation in the world, which gradually, like a phoenix —not coincidentally, *Projeto Fênix* (2018) (*Phoenix Project*) was the name of Bolsonaro’s program— is reborn as Protestant (Monteiro and Teixeira, 2020: 19). A configuration in which ecclesiastical power migrates from the hand of religious leaders with intellectual and theological training, to preachers “of popular training forged in practical experience” (Monteiro and Teixeira, 2020: 19), thus closer to the reality of popular classes into which Pentecostalism spreads most deeply, albeit an interclass phenomenon. In this sense, the formation of a post-Catholic Brazil even began to export some of its new churches, spreading its influence translated into soft power around the world, as in the case of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.¹

The second article, *The relations between the powers under Bolsonarism*, by Christiane Romêo, Lier Pires Ferreira and Ricardo Weber, turns to another axis: the points of tension between the three powers with the rise of an openly authoritarian Executive. An article even more up to date than when it was written, given the publication of the book at the end of 2020 and the recent concerns regarding a possible attempt of institutional rupture on September 7, 2021. The authors highlight how Bolsonarism precedes its own “beginning” in the sense of continuing a tradition of reactionary authoritarianism in

¹ It is worth briefly mentioning the appointment of the former mayor of Rio de Janeiro and Bishop of Universal, Marcello Crivella, as ambassador of South Africa. Crivella would go with the mission of spreading the church across Africa, a method that has already taken root in some of the countries and recently created a diplomatic crisis with Angola (Della Coletta, 2021).

the country. Other articles, such as *The effects of Operation Lava-Jato*, by Izabel Saenger Nuñez, prefer to focus on the institutional crisis that has taken place among the powers in the country.

The third article, *Americanism and Bolsonarism*, by Clarisse Gurgel and Fred Irias, brings up the discussion about the influence of American thought and culture in the formation of Bolsonarism, as well as the subservience of this second in relation to the first. In the midst of the Gramscian perspective on hegemony, the authors work on the construction of a paradoxical servile nationalism by Bolsonaro. A process that is directly related to the following article, *The people and the culture war*, in which Edson Farias deepens the concept of culture war and Bolsonaro's strategy of declassifying his opponents in a Manichean way.

In *The popular classes and Bolsonaro*, Emerson Roche and Ricardo Visser, through empirical research, seek to explain, as the name indicates, the approximation of the subordinate classes with Bolsonarism. In a curious phenomenon, part of Lula's electorate did not hesitate to migrate to Bolsonaro. The authors, therefore, delve into the a priori paradoxical reasons that lead members of the popular classes to migrate from the center-left to the extreme right, supporting policies that, at first sight, seem to harm them. An explanation that, in part, can be found in the following article, by Eric Andriolo, "*Fake News*" and the myth. While fake news alone is insufficient to understand Bolsonaro's rise, it certainly played a key role, fueled by the Hobbesian state of nature that the internet has

become. Also in this scope, Geraldo Tadeu Monteiro, organizer of the book, provides precious inputs by showing that the roots of Bolsonarism were cultivated long before the Messiah's ascension, in a scenario that dates back at least since 2013. For this, he discusses the concept of crisis and its ramifications on political science. In short, showing that Bolsonarism is not a cause, but an effect.

Public policies, their impacts, their constructions and how they have positioned themselves against Bolsonarism, also receive their share of attention. In *A Bolsonarism agenda*, Frederico da Costa discusses, in general terms, these influences in impacts on several Bolsonarist public policies, in the most diverse fields. A point that is further developed in *The Bolsonarism in health*, by José de Sestelo *et al.* In it, the authors analyze Bolsonaro's criminal conduct on the Covid-19 pandemic. The constant exchange of ministers who were not subservient to the imposition of the Messiah is noteworthy, as well as the insistence on false and murderous rhetoric that health harms the economy.

In another scope, Oswaldo Filho and Luiz Bentim explore the violent rhetoric of the Messiah, in parallel with the tyrant described by Plato. Bolsonaro, in this way, reconstructs a discursive virulence that was already present in autocrats over two millennia ago, a discourse that is legitimated and disseminated precisely because of its aggressiveness. An empty rhetoric that is echoed in the following article, *Programmatic crisis*, by Roberto Dutra, in which the author argues about the programmatic vacuum of

Bolsonarism, marked more by an authoritarian moralism than by concrete proposals. Finally, the book closes with an article by the other organizer, Carlos Sávio, *A 'biography' of plebiscitarism*, in which the researcher develops an examination of what he calls plebiscitarism, that is, Bolsonaro's willingness to place for their followers, through social networks, the agendas of the day, collecting information and data about the support or rejection of such measures. An explicit scenario as the president proposes a measure in the press, waits for its repercussion and, if negative, goes back, delegitimizing the press itself in the process as a disseminator of false news.

Bolsonarism, theory and practice is a fundamental book for those, whether researchers or just interested, who seek to understand Bolsonarism in its heterogeneity. The multiplicity of authors and themes makes it possible to form a broad but profound paradigm of a phenomenon that the human sciences will still devote a lot of time to understand. A fundamental theoretical heterogeneity, given that Bolsonarism itself brings together different sub-movements and internal ideologies, in an uncomfortable and inorganic association, but united by common interests. Libertarians, for example, see Bolsonaro as an unpleasant figure to be supported by pro-market measures, the neo-charismatics, united by a moralistic and messianic agenda. Of course, even these groups are large and have internal differences, themselves in constant tension. For, as it turns out from reading the book, Bolsonarism is a phenomenon that precedes and transcends Bolsonaro. And that, even if the president leaves office, it will still last for a long time.

About the author

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