



Revista de Psicologia

ISSN: 2179-1740

revpsico@ufc.br

Universidade Federal do Ceará
Brasil

Fuks, Betty Bernardo Fuks
The Language of the Third Reich and of the Bolsonaro Government
Revista de Psicologia, vol. 13, núm. 1, 2022, Enero-Junio, pp. 10-16
Universidade Federal do Ceará
Brasil

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36517/revpsiufc.13.1.2022.1>

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THE LANGUAGE OF THE THIRD REICH AND OF THE BOLSONARO GOVERNMENT

A LINGUAGEM DO TERCEIRO REICH E A DO GOVERNO BOLSONARO

Betty Bernardo Fuks¹

Abstract

This conference was held on October 23, 2020, virtually, at the invitation of the Après-Coup based in New York and had the intends to show how the current Brazilian government has been using the language and aesthetics of the Third Reich in its statements to the nation and its institutional advertisements, in accord with its stance toward fascism. This development does not, however, seem to be exclusive to Brazil: the fascist state of mind has been spreading in other “democracies” across the planet.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis; Politics; The language of the third reich; The Bolsonaro government.

Resumo

Esta conferência foi realizada em 23 de outubro de 2020, de forma virtual, à convite da Après-Coup sediada em Nova York e teve o objetivo de mostrar como o atual governo brasileiro vem utilizando a linguagem e a estética do Terceiro Reich em suas declarações à nação e em seus anúncios institucionais, de acordo com sua postura em relação ao fascismo. Este desenvolvimento não parece, no entanto, ser exclusivo do Brasil: o estado de espírito fascista vem espalhando-se em outras “democracias” em todo o planeta.

Palavras-chave: Psicanálise; Política; Linguagem do terceiro reich; Governo Bolsonaro.

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The talk I'll be giving today comes out of my sense that Jair Bolsonaro's government, even in historical circumstances so different and quite far from any possible resurgence of the 20th-century's totalitarian regimes, is inspired in its language and its aesthetics by the Third Reich, in addition to bearing the unmistakable features of fascism. It's a deeply embarrassing situation to millions of Brazilians, rousing the unmistakable feeling of anxiety, which is the affect that doesn't deceive, as it takes the subject back to the traumatic situation in which external and internal real dangers come together with the demand of the drive.

Maybe it's why anxiety, as the most accurate hint for psychoanalysts, enables them to better listen to this traumatic political moment that Brazil and the world are going through. This analytical act commits psychoanalysts to the symbolic inheritance Freud left them to extend their individual analytic practice to the role as critic of the culture they witness.

That said, let's address the first part of the title of this essay: On the Language of the Third Reich.

No one has given better thought than the philologist Victor Klemperer to how the new language was devised that led to Nazifying Germany society. His book *The Language of the Third Reich* spells out how language became a tool for manipulating and seducing the German people to the values and visions of the ultra-nationalistic and xenophobic world, all in line with [the main tenet of] Nazi ideology – racism. Klemperer's book clearly shows how the masterminds behind the Third Reich developed a system that was able to reduce the German language to a poor dialect by simplifying its syntactic structures, distorting the meaning of words, mixing up nouns and adjectives, and so on. They also created acronyms, emblems, mottoes, words which condense a whole ideology, and which, by being mechanically repeated thousands of times, "penetrated the flesh and blood of the masses".

Adulteration of the language may have been the most important element in forging German identity, in keeping with the Nazi myth of "blood and soil", guaranteed by the resulting exclusion of Otherness. In other words, the language of the Third Reich provided a practical direction for the myth, a basis of political identification for those who believe they're identical, and segregation for those who were not mirror-images: the alien, the foreigner. It was necessary, for instance, to pervert the signifier "Jew", degrading it to the point at which the Jew was reduced to an infection-bearing virus. It's for this reason I feel I can say with confidence that language as a tool of political domination fostered and ultimately guaranteed the Final Solution: the extermination of the Jews.

The Third Reich created a poor language and an extremely monotonous discourse, yet one deliberately exacerbated to reach the masses and, of course, to fascinate and brainwash the subject. In psychoanalytical terms, one can argue that the function of manipulating signifiers was to capture and dominate the subject and thereby impose an ideology on it: as psychoanalysis points out, politics is always trying to come up with some program for offering an ideological identity where the subject finds itself lacking. In any event, the political program of Nazism went beyond an effort to manipulate master signifiers, establishing a state of isolation and exclusion, eliminating otherness. What's important to stress here is that it was in the absence of the Other that the Nazis of the German National Socialist Party imposed the "idiom" of barbarism.

One can relate this Nazi operation of adulterating and corrupting their language to what George Orwell envisioned in his novel *1984*. In it he writer describes a linguistic system created out of the destruction of existing languages, to block the emergence of opinions contrary to the totalitarian political regime. Orwellian "Newspeak", the fictional language created for his invented hyper-authoritarian government, aimed to restrict critical reflection, and thought. Though the novel was written in the post-war period, which clearly leads us to associate it with the catastrophe

the world had just gone through, Orwell lays out a prophetic scenario of the technological advances to come and the resulting use such power would put the world to: government monitoring, institutionalized lying, and manipulation of history.

Orwell's dystopia leads us back to the twisted semantics of the Third Reich, which aimed to create a state of torpor and confusion. The philosophers [Phillippe] Lacoue-Labarthe and [Jean-Luc] Nancy called it a language of exacerbated faith, one which, allied to an inflammatory aesthetic, served to hypnotize the crowd and subjugate it to the State violence, a violence we also see in Peter Cohen's film, *Architecture of Destruction*. The Nazi aesthetic was constructed obsessively, little by little, to grip people intensely and to promote their identification with the ideals of the Third Reich: the precision of troops' "goose steps", marching to the drum-beat, holding up the swastikas of Party flags, testify in Cohen's film to how far within the German totalitarian State the aesthetics of death and destruction extended.

Perhaps the best-known of Nazi slogans was the famous first line of the nationalistic hymn "Deutschland über alles," (Germany above all), composed by Heinrich Hoffmann in response to a perceived urgency to unify Germany.

Bit by bit, the ideology of race was destroying the social links of Germany in the 1930s. Conversely, an artificial crowd was created, a mass that bore an essentialist and ethnocentric mark – German identity. It is a well-known fact that Freud, in a text of 1921 whose predictions would come true with Hitler's rise to power, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, drew attention to the future of this set of individuals, the mass, or crowd, whose imaginary identity required everyone's subservience to the *Führer*, everyone's ideal ego. German nationalism was consolidated by imposing political acts that pushed the mass to destroy the other who possessed some slight difference. That "objective enemy" of the State, in the words of Hannah Arendt, was the foundation for the new religion that followed the death of God. A religion consecrated at the cost of hate and intolerance of Otherness.

The discourse of Hitler, "the god of the pure race", worked well, in psychoanalytic terms, as the discourse of the Master, promoting the identity of the people, and violence against foreigners who had to be eradicated from Germany. An inevitable paradigm was created: tyranny in the name of protecting the helpless *Volk*. Mussolini, who received Hitler's aid starting in 1943, convinced the Italians he would protect them from the Communist menace through sweeping social reforms. What was at stake in the Nazi regime and in Mussolini's fascism, was not the Dead Father whose murder originates the paternal function, as Freud laid out in the myth of *Totem and Tabu*, but rather the spectacle of the tyrannical and omnipotent father who requires, in the name of love, the faithfulness and obedience of all.

I think these few paragraphs suffice for you to follow my argument that *Bolsonarismo*'s source of inspiration isn't precisely Nazi ideology, but clearly the *language* of the Third Reich, the language that allowed Hitler to occupy the locus of power. As far back as the election campaign in 2018, linguistic expressions directly translated from the German, paraphrases that retain the essence of Nazi thematic terms, together with the destruction, racism and militant aesthetic of the Third Reich, animate Bolsonaro's speech. That is to say, the president's mimicry of the Nazi language that led to the non-democratization of Hitler's Germany aims to ensure that his far-right political project be imposed on and dominate the Brazilian people. For this reason, although we can't regard Brazil's president as a Nazi or a fascist, nothing keeps us from putting him into the category of tyrant. A tyrant who, like other populist leaders, just needs to ensure protection to the Brazilian people by dividing the world into two compartments: the first, "us" - along the lines of "America First" - and then, the others, those different from us, the favorite target of persecutory hatred. The crisis of today's refugees in Europe is likewise set up and supported by leaders who sell the idea of saving their people from the

danger incarnated by Otherness, and in that way guarantee their power.

This is why Bolsonaro chose to paraphrase the Nazi jargon of "Deutschland über alles" (German above all) to boost his candidacy and later his government. The candidate's slogan "Brasil acima de tudo," Brazil above all, was a call to right-wing nationalism and the realization of a populist project. In Portuguese, the slogan "Brasil acima de tudo" was also followed by "Deus acima de todos," "God above all" - a perfectly understandable way to link the future government to the evangelic sector. In any case, Bolsonaro found, in the connection of these two phrases, the guarantee for his election. It scares us today to realize *a posteriori* that such a motto was a forecast of what we're now going through: a new form of governing just for the followers of this ideological regime, since the opponents seem to belong to "the enemies" of the homeland who must be banished from living among the "identical."

Even more frightening, then, is the fact that the future president should have used the very rhetoric of Nazism, racism, to win votes. In a speech he delivered at a Jewish community center, Bolsonaro compared a "member of the *quilombola* community to an animal whose body mass is weighed in *arrobas* (a measuring unit)." The *quilombolas* are descendants of slaves who fled their bondage between the 16th century and the year in which slavery was abolished. Today, they can be found throughout Brazil; they have a rich culture, yet their communities have trouble getting basic health and sanitation services. It was on the very occasion of this speech that Bolsonaro announced his decision that, if he were to be elected, he would expel the Amazonian Indians from their ancient *habitat* and turn it over to capitalist use. A promise that contains the notion of a State that can simply steal from the indigenous and the *quilombola* groups their right to remain on their own lands. Which is just like what happened in the Nazi State when they appropriated the Jews' cultural goods and property.

Just as shocking as his racist remarks was Bolsonaro's choice to make them in the house of a people who'd suffered the genocide devised by the Third Reich. Yet the episode, which drew laughter and applause from the audience, most of them Jewish, proves, at least for us psychoanalysts, that "the narcissism of small differences" can reach a pitch so intense it can extinguish a group's historical memory. Any narcissistic puffing up of the ego or of a group prevents them from recognizing Otherness.

After being elected, Bolsonaro's government created actions and episodes that can be fully linked to its mimicry of the Nazi-fascist language and aesthetic. In an official video, the former secretary of Culture paraphrased Germany's Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, down to the Wagnerian strains so loved by him and his boss, Adolph Hitler. It cost the secretary his post, yet no one can be so naive as to believe that such an episode was isolated from the project that the current government has reserved for any artistic movement they consider inappropriate. The former secretary's speech, one of the leading militants in today's Bolsonarist "culture war," merely confirms that icons of Nazi fascism are feeding the social symptom, the discourse of hate, which frontally assaults Brazil's art and thought.

Another example of the Third Reich sense of language that clearly shows marketing intentions at its core is the release of a video from the Communications Secretariat which contained the translation of the phrase inscribed on the entrance gate to Auschwitz: "*Arbeit macht frei*" "Work sets you free". The secretary of communications reacted to the association that the press and public organizations drew between the video and the memory of the extermination camp by the intended disclaimer that he himself is a Jew. His argument was inappropriate and obscene. The fact that the secretary should appeal to his origins to justify using this phrase simply reveals he's like some would-be "citizen above suspicion" endorsing the motto the Nazi executioners used to cover up what was actually going on in the death camps.

It grows more obvious by the day that Bolsonaro's government identifies with fascist ideological elements; yet Brazil's not alone in such a choice. As Umberto Eco analyzed in 2008, the state of mind of many so-called "democracies" across the planet is that of "eternal fascism." "*Ur-Fascism*", a notion Eco coined to reveal the omnipresence of fascist traits in our culture, shows that, if fascism was *extinguished* at the end of the Second World War, on the other hand, many of its features persist, albeit independently.

The most solid proof of Eco's thesis are the statements and acts of hyper-nationalistic leaders- among them, the president of the United States and of Hungary, **Poland's prime minister, the Philippine's president and Brazil's president, leaders who aim toward the actual possibility of an imminent return of the unburied corpse of the Father of the Horde**, as happened in the heyday of Fascism, Nazism and Stalinism.

Another feature of *Ur-fascism* is the *cult of tradition*. The reactionary and conservative rise of neo-Pentacostal sects we've been seeing all across Brazil for decades, are the main ally of the Bolsonaro government in its efforts to stop the advancement of knowledge and foster traditionalism. In this sense Bolsonarist obscurantism and anti-science foreshadows something fairly similar to what Freud saw coming on the eve of World War II: the return of religious obscurantism. At the time, in private conversation with Marie Bonaparte, Freud insisted, in the face of the princess's efforts to convince him that the obscurantist evil of anti-Semitism was just a holdover from the Dark Ages. Freud replied: "Just wait, we're going to see the terrible, offensive return of religious obscurantism." Paraphrasing the creator of psychoanalysis, we can say that the government's obscurantist and antiscientific offensive against Brazil's intelligentsia and its universities attests to the return of one of fascism's most perverse traits. "The Earth is flat," "Global warming doesn't exist," are just two of the statements that aim not merely to discredit or attack scientific knowledge, philosophy and the human sciences, but to negate them outright, to deny them and cover them up with traditionalistic and religious assertions.

The reaction against diversity, another trait of *Ur-fascism* also prevails over Brazil's current reality. A typical feature of regimes which, according to Eco, **put up intense opposition to critical analysis, to the paradoxes of the world of ideas, and exert as much repression and monitoring of sexuality as they can.**

If the creators of Nazi-fascism ideology considered homosexuality a pathology and therefore sent thousands of men and women to the gas chambers, today, the current minister of the Ministry of Women, the Family, and Human Rights, Damares Alves, repudiates and openly attacks all non-heterosexual orientations, in addition to waging a real war against Gender Studies, and ignoring what Psychoanalysis and Anthropology have to say on the issue. She proposes suppressing the subject of desire, advocates for rigid and hierarchical sexual codes, and offers a supposed "gay cure": objectives that reveal the Brazilian government's structural aversion to the social difference of multiculturalism.

The Minister, who is also an evangelical preacher, supports the idea that sexual abstinence should be the only means possible to prevent premature pregnancy. She rules out any sort of sexual education as a solution to this problem that affects so many teenage girls, most of them from the poorest sector of the population. The ministerial proposal is to dismantle cultural advances concerning the practice of sexuality, preventing teenagers from any physical intimacy until adulthood. A fascist moralism by definition: to regulate *jouissance* by infiltrating, to echo Klemperer, "the flesh and blood of the People", a repressor's view of the world for the purpose of dominating it.

Another trait that speaks of the government's tendency toward fascism is the institutionalization of lying. In addition to fake news, it has found a way to corrupt testimonies of the recent past by rewriting history, until history fits

perfectly into the ideological discourse it supports. Such is the case with a statement Bolsonaro made when he visited the Holocaust Museum in Israel: he declared then that he "had no doubts" that Nazism had been a *left-wing* movement. And there resides one of the most destructive linchpins of this government: It isn't a matter here of an attempt to extinguish the marks of History in a way similar to how the crime took place in which, as Freud pointed out in *Moses and Monotheism*, "the hard thing isn't doing the deed, but rather eliminating its traces". The government hasn't the least pretense of "changing its appearance" or of "putting elsewhere, relocating" the truth of an assassination. What really matters to this government is to exclude and banish, beyond the country's borders and from all the Brazilian generations to come, any sort of knowledge that implies institutionalizing the conflict with power. So there's nothing accidental about the battle the former Minister of Culture has waged with Brazil's universities and schools. Knowledge needs to be controlled by the State; otherwise, scientific research can lead to views contrary to the reigning ideology.

Likewise, it will be necessary to determine the programmatic contents of the area of human sciences and, as happened in the Third Reich, accuse the professor, without concrete proofs, of causing "pandemonium," creating "pot plantations," "dope kitchens." As Umberto Eco points out, the fascist's relation to culture is always one of warfare, probably best exemplified by Goebbels' infamous declaration: "Whenever I hear talk of culture, I want to reach for my gun".

This statement from the mastermind behind the great book-burning at the University of Berlin echoes in the speech and actions of the Environment Minister. The fires in the Amazon, promoted ever since his administration began, are causing devastating losses to the economy, to health and to the environment. The minister's habit of denying data provided by scientific and academic institutes on the burnings and the deforestations has also helped decimate the indigenous peoples in the Amazon Rainforest. Not to mention the total absence of protection of them from Covid-19, which, in the words of the great photographer Sebastião Salgado, is pushing Brazil's Indians "to the brink of genocide."

As I close these brief reflections, let me reiterate that Jair Bolsonaro's far-right government has found in the language of the Third Reich a model for action and political marketing. Clearly, this points to the fact that the basis for his policies, his politics, partakes in Nazi fascism, the belief that eliminating everything it considers "dangerous" – the Communists, science, the knowledge of the human sciences – will grant it omnipotence. But we have to recognize that the Bolsonarist language and aesthetics, no matter how hard they mimic the actions of the Third Reich, fit into a different historical and spatial context, different from that of the 1930s, in a process of civilization perhaps more evolved in various ways, although History is already weary from showing that progress is no guarantee against barbarism.

Despite the president's popularity shooting up drastically thanks to the emergency aid his government's handing out to the poorest population, what we've observed so far is that Brazilians are not much taken in by their president's slogans and incendiary actions. Though the government makes efforts to deny and even to bar Brazil's recent political history from basic teaching, - for instance, the 1964 coup d'état – Brazilians' memory still serves as a permanent archive available to individual and social elaborations of its collective trauma. An archive that prevents the current president from becoming the interpreter of the people, and that likewise serves as resistance to any idealization or nostalgia for the military dictatorship and also against the snares of national identity and populist manipulation of the unruly motions of the drives.

Last but not least, though it's clear that psychoanalysts don't listen to groups, but rather to subjects, one by one, it's also true that they can't ignore the political-cultural movements of their time or their inscription in history. By being

alert to historical facts, we protect the institution of psychoanalysis from disappearing, as we know that Freud's subversion cannot flourish, and never could have flourished, in fascist regimes. Hatred as a policy produced the culture of violence we faced throughout the 20th century, and, as we see with increasing clarity, it's now giving wings to the politics of our time. This is all about the State power unleashing its mechanisms of hatred against the other to promote *in-difference* among citizens. We cannot forget Freud's remark, shortly before he went into exile in London, escaping from the fate the Third Reich reserved for foreigners: "We live in a very especially odd time. To our horror, we have found out that progress is sealing a pact with barbarism." How sad that his words should still be so relevant today!

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