

Fake News and World Alienation: Reflections on Bolsonaro's use of *Whatsapp*

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Abstract

I outline here a still tentative approach to a central question of our time: how do new communication technologies and their politics affect the political? Jair Bolsonaro's use of *Whatsapp* in his victorious electoral campaign and in his first 18 months of government serve here as example and source of reflection. In this approach, which is still tentative, Arendt's notion of world alienation is highlighted because it makes possible to point at a difference between public appearance and the images that form our digital life. For Arendt, as one knows, the world has appearance and a thing-character, which bestows it with an objectivity; compared to the objects and appearance of the world, the fluid character of the images becomes particularly prominent, and that makes it easier to show why even the most absurd fake news can easily find people prone to believe them. Social media did not invent images, but took them to a greater degree of control and took people to a greater degree of alienation, and Bolsonaro knew how to use them by bringing to the public all the fluidity of the images, which resulted in an enormous electoral force and in a great capacity to destroy institutions.

After nearly two years of never knowing whether to believe the worst, of trying to focus on the demands of their day-to-day lives and then helplessly absorbing every rumor about what the government had in store for them, of never being able to justify either their alarm or their composure with hard fact — after so much perplexity, they were so ripe for delusion...

Philip Roth — *The Plot Against America*

For us, appearance — something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves — constitutes reality.

Arendt — “The Common” (*The Human Condition*)

An invisible undermining of the political system

Among analysts of Brazilian politics, there is a consensus on the fact that the political system of the country is now facing a major crisis. There are slight disagreements about the moment this crisis started, and deep disagreements as to the causes or the depth of the predicament, but there is no serious doubt about the existence of a significant rupture. Some right-wing analysts who are firmly aligned with classical liberalism have diminished the exceptional character of what is happening by stating that this palpable tension that has run high in the country results from the plurality of a society, and actually proves the resilience of the system. Their statements stand in direct contrast to their own increasing (and sometimes desperate) effort to point at countless “minor failures” of the checks and balances system, since the sheer sum of these “small flaws” we have to fix would correspond to the entire system.

The election of Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency in 2018 is an important moment of this breakdown. Bolsonaro's election and government are not the cause of the dismantling, but they are both a result of it — because the crisis opened space for his rise — and a force in it — since he has actively acted for the destruction of the system. The ruin of the system and the rise of Bolsonaro have particular Brazilian elements — such as our economic crisis, problems of the political system, certain choices of the Workers' Party (Lula's Party), class and racial prejudices among others — but it also has aspects that are not restricted to Brazil and may interest readers from other countries as well. Analysts have put Bolsonaro in a row with Trump, Erdogan, Orbán, Salvini, Duterte and other leaders around the world because of his far-right positions and because of what has been called “populism”. These comparisons are relevant and must be encouraged (the difficulties of the concept of populism notwithstanding), but I am concerned here with something that is not necessarily a common element between these leaders and is not restricted to the far-right — although it is stronger in this political group.¹ Through

¹ Benkler, Faris and Roberts argued that far-right, when compared with other political groups, has worse relation to “good journalism” and more difficulties to distinguish between true and false online. See BENKLER, 2018, chapter 11. I must thank Professor Pablo Ortellado (USP) for suggesting me this book.

Bolsonaro I intend to point at a more fundamental problem, one that modern digital politics have posed, not only to Brazil or to the left, but to the political itself.

Social media are part of Brazilian electoral campaigns since at least 2010, but 2018 seems to be a step forward as to that because social media played, not a minor, but a key role at the result. A symptom of this new, more important role may be recognized in the fact that, until mid-August (the elections took place in October), there was consensus among analysts that Jair Bolsonaro was an uncompetitive candidate. The main reasons for this discredit were his short time on TV (he had 8 seconds and 11 short insertions daily; Alckmin, who had the longest time, had 5 minutes and 32 seconds and 434 insertions), his outstanding inability in debates and interviews and the complete absence of a party structure to support him (shortly before the election, Bolsonaro left his party — the seventh in his career — to join a tiny little one, which he left a few months after taking office). In addition, all analysts followed the historical lesson, according to which far-right (as well as far-left) is weak in elections because their positions produce too much rejection among voters.

These rather traditional analyses were confirmed, so to speak, by what one may call Bolsonaro's irrelevant *public appearance*. Until June 2013, when massive demonstrations against the then government took place, Bolsonaro was just an obscure deputy leaning on the comfort of his position and collecting small controversies and lawsuits due to politically incorrect statements.² Since he did not have a relevant appearance, he remained largely invisible to the press, political parties, great economic interests, or university. Until mid-2018, Bolsonaro's interviews with the press were entirely linked to the small controversies he was involved in; no relevant party had ever made any serious effort for him to join (not even after the election); no major entrepreneur has ever counted on his economic ideas or offered him considerable money for his campaigns. A search for his name in university libraries results in very few entries prior to 2017.

But it does not mean he did not exist or was completely unknown to Brazilians. With the emergence and expansion of social media, Bolsonaro found a favorable space to spread his *image* and, as he accumulated expressive numbers of followers on *Facebook* and *Twitter*, in a few years he became a celebrity *in the digital world*. His strategy was neither new nor original: explore the politically incorrect, “speak his mind” to denounce hypocrisy of society, create small but noisy events (like swear at a feminist deputy) etc. The ease with which certain themes and controversies have fertile soil in social media is notorious and has been subject of interesting debate, but I would like to draw attention here to the fact that his success in the digital world, his intense presence on *individual screens* did not create a public appearance of him.

² Idelber Avelar correctly states that Bolsonaro was already well known in Barretos since 2013. It does not contradict, but rather confirms the idea that Bolsonaro had an irrelevant public appearance. Barretos is a countryside town known for its rodeo party and is a symbol of a cowboy culture formed by bulls, horses, shiny large buckles, pick-up trucks, and a simple approach to life. This way of life is fairly widespread in Brazil, practically dominant throughout the central-west region and in significant parts of states of São Paulo, Minas Gerais and Tocantins. Despite this penetration, however, it appears little in the public debate and in, say, the sphere of official culture created in the big urban centers, which normally conceives these people as hicks or simpletons, making them invisible in a way. See AVELAR, I — “A rebelião do eles: léxico, morfologia e sintaxe do fascismo bolsonarista” in. Estado da Arte. 03/07/2020. Available in: <https://estadodaarte.estadao.com.br/rebeliao-eles-fascismo-bolsonarista-idelber-avelar/>

Invisible to the light of the public sphere, Bolsonaro did not have, until very recently, a relevant public appearance made by traditional media, political parties, justice, universities, or any other traditional institution. But an immense and rather unnoticed flow of images of him, carefully crafted for individual consumption on individual screens, circulated by and large for years prior to 2018 election. In other words, individually, so to speak, most of us came to have some contact with Bolsonaro's name and image on our screens; he did not have a relevant public appearance, but millions of us had “individual” images of him. These seemingly separated spaces are actually complementary, because one of the main claims made by these images was its absence in the public. An essential counterpart of these many images was thus the absence of public appearance made by traditional institutions, an absence that seems to be one of the conditions for the success of this “individual” images.

Two or three months before election, while opinion polls showed Bolsonaro comfortably ahead in vote intentions, traditional analysts believed he would melt as the campaign progressed. An exception, however, was Maurício Moura, an economist, professor at George Washington University and founder of IDEA Big Data, an election marketing consultancy of international experience. In a rather unnoticed interview with *El Pais Brasil* published in February 2018,³ Moura stated that this election would follow other standards, and Bolsonaro was a highly competitive candidate. Television would no longer have the importance that was traditionally attributed to it, and most voters would make their decisions based on what they received through social media. To my knowledge, he was the first to state Bolsonaro was a strong competitor, and it is particularly significant that a big data specialist was right against the current (traditional) opinion.

I do not intend to say that social media was the only responsible for Bolsonaro's victory. There is no doubt, however, that the images crafted along years for individual consumption on social media contributed decisively to his victory and to the whole rupture Brazil has been going through. One of the forces of these images lies on their invisibility to the public eye.

Bolsonaro was perfectly aware of the force he had in the digital world, and thus strove to remain restricted to this space as much as he could. This restriction was made easier by the simple increase of access to social media — that “naturally” spread images of him all over the country — and by the institutional public sphere, that for different reasons refused him a relevant public appearance. A violent incident against him also contributed to this invisibility: during the campaign, Bolsonaro was stabbed on the street with serious consequences, and withdrew from campaign activities for a few weeks. One could expect that he would make efforts to be back on the streets and on the news as soon as possible, but he did exactly the opposite; he rather deliberately extended his convalescent condition until the end of the campaign, almost two months later, to avoid interviews and debates, leaving the entire final stretch of his campaign to be made through social media by his team.

³ "Bolsonaro é favorito para vencer se disputar o segundo turno contra o PT" in *El Pais Brasil*, 19.feb.2018. Available in: https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/02/05/politica/1517859015_344880.html

Between the first and the second round, *Folha de São Paulo* (a newspaper of national relevance) found that two weeks before the first round, Bolsonaro's campaign had bombarded *Whatsapp* users with fake news⁴ against his main opponent, Fernando Haddad. The technique was similar to what has been called “firehosing of falsehood”, after an article by Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, from Rand Corporation.⁵ The article is about Vladimir Putin propaganda model, which is structured in four distinctive features: a high-volume of multichannel messages; rapid, continuous, and repetitive messages; lack of commitment to objective reality; lack of commitment to consistency. This high, rapid and continuous volume of unreal and inconsistent messages is firehosed on people flooding them and making them confused about what is true and what is not. The article does not mention Trump and, in an interview with Vox,⁶ Paul stated that he was not concerned with Trump, but with Russian influence upon US elections. This statement raises doubts about the article — that was “sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense” — but the model described certainly offers us insights that go beyond Putin.

Whatsapp is the most popular messaging app in Brazil, with more than 120 million users connected to each other. Its encryption and its particularly private character (there is no public wall, there is no following, possibly not even a name) make it extremely hard to monitor. It is fairly useful to share messages, pictures, or links, individually or in groups, and a remarkable feature of its sharing tool is that the author of the original message easily becomes untraceable. When one receives a message, one does not receive reliable information as to who created it; one only knows who is the last person who shared it and nothing else. With no traceable author, no profile wall, and no public appearance at all, invisibility is particularly strong on *Whatsapp*, and Bolsonaro's team could hire one or two offices to imperceptibly send millions of messages at a precise moment of the campaign. These millions of messages are directly associated with a very sharp increase in voting intentions registered in the two last weeks of the campaign (Bolsonaro rose approximately one percentage point per day in the last twelve or thirteen days), a growth that almost assured him victory in the first round.

This use of *Whatsapp* raises legal issues regarding the astroturfing character of the funding to these actions (political and legal disputes are unfolding to this day), but I am interested here in the invisible character of this “underground” of the electoral process” (MOURA & CORBELLINI, 2019, p.31). Images of political content have circulated through *Whatsapp* for years completely removed from public light. Bolsonaro's team was able to organize this content, produce more of it and then decisively influence the course of the national election by sending it at a precise moment of the campaign to millions of people who could all too easily share it countless times. It is not absurd to think that every

4 Benkler, Faris and Roberts suggested that the expression “fake news” is vague and should be overcome for more precise terms. I agree with them, but I decided to keep it here because it fits well for the purposes of this essay, and because adopting their terms would demand a too long explanation. See (BENKLER, 2018, pp. 8-20)

5 See PAUL, Christopher and Miriam MATTHEWS — “The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It. RAND Corporation, 2016. Available in: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>

6 See “Why obvious lies make great propaganda”. Youtube, uploaded by VOX, 31.aug.2018. <https://youtu.be/nknYtlOvaQo>

single one of the 120 millions of Brazilians who have a *Whatsapp* number was touched by at least one of these messages sent by this firehose of falsehood, but they only became more or less publicly visible months later, when legal irregularities were discovered; it was only at that point that press, law, parties or universities introduced the topic into the public debate.

Brief, there was something happening on the small screens that each of us carry on the pocket, someone was able to manage it during the campaign, and, though everybody had somehow been touched by the flux of images, public opinion took months to actually be aware of it.

This phenomenon may lead us to a discussion that goes beyond Bolsonaro, since one may question the status of this space that has no public visibility but has decisive influence on the political system. I propose here an approach through Hannah Arendt's reflections on world alienation and the thing-character of the world. According to Arendt, the world has a thing-character, an objectivity, and it offers us criteria to distinguish between truth and lies. An increasing part of modern life has been spent on the screens, where individual "worlds" have been fabricated, and one of the consequences of this substitution is the weakening of the thing-character of the world. Weak objectivity is a condition for fake news. Arendt's reflections usually go the ontological level of the matter, and it is not different with the themes of truth and lies related to politics. Despite the difficulty of this approach, it is worth going there for a while.

The durability and appearance of the world. The invisible flow of the body

At the most general level, Arendt links lies to human freedom, because lying manifest our ability to state something that is not in the world. "It is by no means a matter of course that we can *say* 'The sun shines', when it actually is raining (...); rather it indicates that while we are well equipped for the world, sensually as well as mentally, we are not fitted or embedded into it as one of its inalienable parts. We are free to change the world and to start something new in it." (ARENDR, 1972, p.11).⁷ In other words, our language does not necessarily stick to the world around us, therefore we are not sheer reproducers of the real, as we can express what is not in the world. Seen from the perspective of the world, this ability is a source of change since it makes us capable of changing the world by bringing something new into it.

This means, therefore, that the world is not the only space in which we exist. The different places where we can find, for example, the eternal ideas or the flows that organize the life of the body and the life of the mind are not, strictly speaking, part of the world. What exists or happens in these spaces cannot be properly called things, or objects, since they lack two distinctive features of the world and its objects: *appearance and durability*.

Throughout her work, Arendt states unequivocally the phenomenal character of the world. To this thinker whose formative years were spent during the German phase of the phenomenological movement (Spiegelberg), the world is only as long as it appears; in the

⁷ This same discussion, including the same example, also appears in section IV of "Truth and Politics".

world “*Being and Appearing coincides.*” (ARENDT, 1978, p.19 — italics in the original) This means that the world does not exist by itself, as an eternal substance waiting for someone to discover it. Firstly, because much of the world is the result of human work and, therefore, owes its being to humans. Furthermore, and more importantly in our context, because “[N]othing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a *spectator.*” (ARENDT, 1978, p.19 — italics in the original) An appearance is only if there is someone to see it, hear it, touch it, taste it or smell it, i.e. an appearance is “composed” by two sides, as it were, sides that can be roughly described as “I” and the “world”.

Just like other thinkers of the phenomenological movement, Arendt intends to dissolve the conception of “I” as a substance radically separated from the world, like the Cartesian *cogito* or the Kantian transcendental subject. Here, “I” and “world” are very close to each other and constitute each other, because to be, the world needs to appear and be perceived by someone. It must be kept in mind, however, that there is no one capable of perceiving the world completely, from what follows that the world is always a part of the world — the perceived part; the “I” is not constituted by the whole world, but by the perceived world.

This does not mean, however, that “I” and the world are identical. Arendt does not merge one into the other, but, on the contrary, keeps them ontologically different based on the different time and spaces that make them meaningful. At the beginning of *The Life of the Mind*, in a chapter dedicated to the appearance and phenomenal nature of the world, Arendt states that “although there are great differences among these activities [spiritual activities], they all have in common a *withdrawal* from the world as it appears and a bending back toward the self.” (ARENDT, 1978, p.22 — italics in the original; my underline)

Self and world are connected spaces but are organized according to different temporalities. The world is there before our birth and will remain after our death. This does not mean that it is eternal, like Plato's ideas, since the world is made of objects that are essentially created by human beings, and thus were introduced into the world at a certain moment and can be destroyed. It is not immortal neither, because it is possible to remove objects from it, but specially because, to be, the world needs to be perceived and, when there is no one to perceive it, it perishes. A world with no one to attend it does not exist, or rather, it does not appear and, therefore, it is not.

Neither eternal nor immortal, the world is durable, i.e. it has a *thing-character* that gives it stability. A city, for example, may appear very differently to different people depending on the position occupied by each person. The same city can mean tourism, job opportunities, home, hostile place, a desire, a certain idea of romanticism, order, chaos, etc. Every person who has a relation with this city can change it in some way, preserve it, remove objects from it or put new ones into it, but no one can annihilate it through destruction. Even when something close to this happens, there remains a memory, a nostalgia, a relief, an indignation or other feelings that may return to the world in the form of a new object, like a work of art. The point here is that countless lives pass through this city, but the city does not pass. It changes, little by little, as these passages take place, but the city is stable and remains while all these lives pass.

Annihilation of the world is possible, though, but not by destruction. Since it depends on spectators to exist, the world can disappear completely if no one takes it as part of one's world; i.e. it ceases to exist if nobody takes it as an effective presence, be it in the past (memory), in the present or in the future (projections). In other words, the greatest threat to the existence of the world is not exactly its destruction, but the alienation from it. If nobody has this city as an appearance, the city has no Being.

As I indicated above, a withdrawal from the world can be done through a “bending back toward the self”. The quote was taken from a discussion about the life of the mind, but the “bending back toward the self” movement does not take us exclusively to the mind and spiritual activities, since human beings are not only minds, but also bodies, and the body has its unworldly parts, too. In *The Human Condition* we find an explanation of durability and the consequent stability of the world in contrast to another space and another time: the life cycle, located in the human body. “It is this durability which gives the things of the world their relative independence from men who produced and use them, their 'objectivity' which makes them withstand, 'stand against' and endure, at least for a time, the voracious *needs and wants* of their living makers and users.” (ARENDR, 1998, p.137)

Instead of heading to the gap between past and future that pushes us to infinity, when we are bending back to our bodies we are getting close to the eternal cycle of vital needs and wants, a cycle structured in constant and necessary production and consumption. These needs and wants, as Arendt famously stated, are met by the activity of labor, and the distance taken by *animal laborans* from the world was called world alienation, the “hallmark of modern times.”

Needs and wants flow according to necessity. They determine the movement of human beings *qua animal laborans* toward products capable of satisfying them. In this satisfaction, the products are consumed, that is, they are annihilated leaving behind only the energy used by the body, an energy that will soon be extinguished, requiring a new effort to satisfy new needs and wants. There is no durability here, but a constant flow of needs and wants. This flow of production and consumption is eternal, since it is basically the same for all human beings in different times and spaces; moreover, because it is cyclical, it is also predictable, which means that it can be largely controlled by those who know how it flows. The flow of needs and wants organizes the existence of the *animal laborans*, and, when humans are dedicated to it, they are distant from the world, they have withdrawn from the world, they are bent back toward themselves.

The difference between the stable durability of the world and the eternal cycle of needs and wants assigns completely different meanings to objects and products. To take an extreme example: the bread that William Shakespeare consumed while writing *Othello* fulfilled an imperative need and disappeared along with that need. From Mr. William's point of view, those products (bread) were very important and satisfied a need imposed by his body; from the point of view of the world, however, only *Othello* has any sense because, in contrast with the breads, it has an appearance available to anyone who has any relation to it.

As an object of the world, *Othello* has an appearance and a durability that impose certain limits on what can and cannot be done with it. It is not only possible, but

inevitable that we have different relations with *Othello*; we can love it for its beauty, because it brings memories of someone or some situation, we can have great reverence because its Art with capital “a”, or hate it because a high school teacher ordered us to read it during the summer or because of its racism. It is also possible to interpret it in many different ways. But it is absolutely not possible to meaningfully say that the play mentions the French Revolution, or was written on a computer, or was dictated by Zumbi dos Palmares, or that its author was influenced by Goethe.

Anyone who has *Othello* as a significant part of his or her world respects these limits and would immediately identify as a liar someone who claims anything beyond them. These limits are imposed by the object itself, by its sheer objectivity, which protects it from consumption and provides its resistance against the voracious needs and wants one may throw upon it. But as I mentioned earlier, objects of the world are not threatened only by consumption, but also by alienation. A two-year child or a Brazilian Indian who has never had any contact with “white men” would believe those lies about *Othello* and could easily cross all the limits imposed by the object itself because it takes no part in their world. A perfect *animal laborans*, whose existence is spent exclusively bent back toward its body, would believe them as well.

Anyone whose world contains a certain object in a significant way, no matter the perspective, realizes that the appearance of the object imposes limits; i.e the limits are based on the object's appearance, on the object's own thing-character. When objects belong to the world of many people, the limits imposed by them are shared by many and produce a kind of side effect, as it were, called common sense — “which the French so suggestively call the 'good sense,' *le bon sens*” (ARENDT, 2006, p.218) (In Brazil and Portugal we also use a suggestive expression: “*bom senso*”). These limits brought about by things cannot be legitimately exceeded or manipulated on the behalf of what is out of the world, such as needs and wants. Things are lasting, they have the same “stubborn thereness” (ARENDT, 2006, p.253) Arendt attributes to facts and this is essentially the reason why their meaning is lost when they fall in to the cyclical character of needs and wants imposed by life. Bending back exclusively to the body, as does the *animal laborans*, weakens common (or good) sense and lightens its weight on the behavior of people, who may easily cross the limits imposed by the things, may believe in absolutely anything and act accordingly. Not exactly because one is stupid or has been to bad school, but because the objective fundamental criteria, i.e. *appearance* is lacking and the flow of needs and wants can freely impose itself.

That would not be a great political problem if it was restricted to one or some individuals, but it is a decisive issue since modern life in a labor society favors world alienation by weakening the perception and the respect for the limits imposed by the thing-character of the objects of the world. If we think of the ravages of fake news around the planet, we will notice the extension of the threat put by world alienation.

Free flow

The crossing of limits imposed by the objects may lead to absurd situations, and the ease with which people may believe in absurd fake news indicates it very well. An

internationally famous example of it is the “Pizzagate”. In 2016, a young man invaded a pizza restaurant in Washington (USA) armed with a rifle in order to dismantle a supposed pedophilia ring created by the then presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Investigation did not need much time to realize that it was not the adventure of a single crazy wolf, but the act was connected to a huge amount of fake news discussed online by thousands and thousands of people during a considerable length of time. In these online forums, there were no stable or durable objects imposing limits, just feelings and sensations (needs and wants) flowing.

In Brazil we have had our share of this kind of thing. One particularly famous was the so-called “kit-gay”. Lula administration (2003-10) promoted a series of profound changes in the educational system, both in form and content. Particularly important was the guideline of including a greater heterogeneity and plurality in the contents still massively tributary to colonialism. African and indigenous themes, as well as a greater openness to minorities finally entered the school. Accordingly, educational supplies were created for the greater and better acceptance of the LGBT people, and the minister of education, Fernando Haddad (who in 2018 would be Bolsonaro's opponent in the presidential campaign), commissioned the preparation of supplies for teachers.

Certain groups of society resisted arguing that it was an early eroticization of children. It raised innumerable voices stating that, behind that action, stand Lula's secret plan to transform children into homosexuals. The pressure was intense and the government reversed, but there remained the idea that Lula's proposal was just a step in the grandiose plan of destabilizing the Christian family cell in order to eventually create a society in which nobody belongs to the family, but to the state; in short, people linked it to the spread of communism.

These tediously repetitive ideas and connections provoked fears and afflictions (feelings and sensations) in a large group of people over the years. Fake news linked to the erotic-communist intention of Lula government spread like fungus in the digital world; for years, no one dared to mention it in public, but millions of people discussed it “seriously” online. Some fake news were very reasonable ones, like the inclusion of the book *Willies: A User's Guide* (by H  l  ne Bruller and Zep) as a book to be read at school; this was a lie, but a plausible one, since books are regularly sent to schools and the majority of the population do not participate in the choice. (Significantly enough, public opinion only heard about the book and the “perverted intention” behind it in 2018, when Bolsonaro “revealed the plan” while talking to journalists.)

Beside these lies, however, there were other frankly delusional and bizarre ones, clearing crossing every limit imposed by objectivity. Among these stands the now famous “penis baby bottle”, a nursing bottle with a rubber penis in place of the teat. According to the pictures and the messages that circulated intensely on social media (specially on *Whatsapp*), it had been distributed by the erotic-communist government to public school children in order to accustom the boys to homosexuality from an early age.

The countless people — probably on the scale of millions! — who have given some credit to this lunatic story have completely ignored the limits to actions imposed by objects and by the world. They ignored the fact that the distribution of any supply to the public-school system in a country with 200 million inhabitants goes through an endless

number of meetings, decisions, agreements, tenders, purchase proposals, etc. They also ignored that school supplies indicated by the federal government, after being discussed in several departments, go through the bureaucracy of the ministry of education, the municipal secretariat (which distributes them), the school board, the school council, the teachers. They ignored that journalists, who make a living reporting government deeds and misdeeds, would love to receive such hot news. They ignored that justice could be put into action. They ignored that no parent has ever received it at the school their children attend to. They ignored that they have never actually seen such an object.

None of this was taken into account by (possibly) millions of individuals who, in a sort of connected loneliness, received images on their smartphones indicating the threatening existence of a hidden desire of a political group to eroticize children in order to destroy the family cell and implant atheistic communism in Brazil, a desire that managed to overcome all these institutions without anyone noticing, and distribute an erotic object in schools without the parents resorting to any institution. In other words, the resistance imposed by the simple existence of institutions long before the then government, and the fact that the object never existed out of the screens were simply not relevant. Only fear, disgust, rage, feelings and sensations like these played a role during the years in which the image of the bottle circulated, unnoticed by the public, from smartphone to smartphone.

Controlling the flow

One of the striking experiences of this early 21st century is that the *animal laborans*, which we all are to some extent, is constantly and epidemically touched by images that pop up in the small and fascinating screens that we carry in our pockets — i.e. very close to our bodies, hence far from the world. These images may even contain references to the world, but durability makes little sense in this fluid experience; not even the devices, subjected to programmed obsolescence, escape the circular character of production and consumption. But it is important to notice that this distance from the world does not lead us to interiority or reflection, since digital life is organized in a very fast temporality, one appropriate to sensations and feelings; we are here far from the world and from the life of the mind. Sensations, feelings and superficiality are legitimate modes of existence, of course, but the flow of images has been able to absorb us almost entirely, since much of life, “the highest good of modern Man”, actually passes through the screens. This means that the process of world alienation initiated with the “three great events that stand at the threshold of the modern age” (ARENDDT, 1998, p.248) seems to have taken a very significant step forward with the increasing possibilities of replacing part of the world for images of the world. In this world made of images, the resistance offered by the thing-character of objects is almost entirely overcome, and the limits imposed by the stubborn thereness of objects and facts tend to weaken further — the forthcoming “deep fake technology” is prompt to take it even further. On screens, it is just too easy to create images entirely detached from the world and offer them as a substitute for the world. Marketing has mastered the techniques, and Bolsonaro's campaign team was very efficient in this art.

Lying has been with politics since its beginning and there is nothing new in the effort to deceive voters or opponents. The substitution of reality for an image of reality provided by technologies is also not an entirely new phenomenon and Arendt herself saw it happen decades ago. In the essay “Truth and Politics”, she states: “Such completeness and potential finality, which were unknown to former times, are the dangers that arise out of the modern manipulation of facts. (...) And national propaganda on the government level has learned more than a few tricks from business practices and Madison Avenue methods. Images made for domestic consumption, as distinguished from lies directed at a foreign adversary, can become a reality for everybody and first of all for the image-makers themselves...”(ARENDT, 2006, p.250).

In “Lying in Politics”, Arendt claims that tricks and methods from business and Madison Avenue are recent varieties in the old art of lying (see ARENDT, 1972, p.13), and we may now say that this variety has gone more efficient due to technology and behaviorist psychology as well. As *animal laborans* we are very similar to each other and it is not difficult to anticipate or manipulate needs and wants we have in order to live our lives. The more restricted we are to life, the more predictable we are. Business know that for a long time, and Arendt claimed in the 1970s that “[T]he psychological premise of human manipulability has become one of the chief wares that are sold on the market of common and learned opinion.”(ARENDT, 1972, 13). The psychological premise is clearly operating behind the algorithms that rule our digital life. Two recent books written by whistleblowers⁸ who worked for Cambridge Analytica confirm what most of us has suspected from daily use of internet: computers are trying to read our feelings and sensations, and are succeeding it. One need not to believe or accept everything these whistleblowers say in their books to be sure that an intense knowledge of behaviorist psychology is behind the ads that constantly pop up in our screens trying to capture our sensations and feelings in order to sell us products — including political ones.

One of the essential efforts of marketing has always been to direct the right images to the right group, that is, to identify or direct people's needs and wants to offer products. Marketing has thus always considered people based on certain traits, certain characteristics that can offer ways to approach people. People became targeted and had certain “worlds” attributed to them. For example the “world” attributed to a middle-class family living in the USA is made up of a car, barbecue grill, family health plan, life insurance, etc. This “world” is not for everyone, and not all members of their own family participate in it, but there are “worlds” for everyone else, like the mother's, which consists of clothes, skin care, recipes, gossip, etc. Despite the advances in this sectorization, there was still a distance between many individuals and these different “worlds” manufactured for certain groups. Many people still remained alien to them or unable to effectively enter them.

This inconvenience has been overcome by the possibility of individualizing the offer with the help of the so-called microtargeting, a technique that aims to direct ads focused to individuals, not to large groups like “American middle-class family”. The most modern marketing today does not create “worlds” for groups, but individual “worlds” formed from

⁸ I refer here to Brittany Kaiser's *Targeted* (Harper Collins, 2019) and Christopher Wylie's *Mindfuck* (Random House, 2019)

data offered by our daily behavior — using social media, paying with credit card, walking with the smartphone on the pocket, pushing “like” here or there, sharing this or that article, talking to a virtual assistant etc. The ambient we create in our computers and smartphones, and the bubbles we live in social media are sources of an immense amount of individualized data that allows companies to create a whole individual “world” for us. In terms of world alienation, we have gone a step forward, as the weak connection we had with people belonging to the same target group became even weaker with the emergency of these individual “worlds”. The uprootedness has gone further, since we are in a “world” seen by us, but not by others.

This last development in the old art of lying results in a more accurate control of the flux of feelings and sensations, which, by their own nature, have no public appearance. “Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life — the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses — lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit for public appearance.” (ARENDDT, 1998, 50) The passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses, as well as hatred, fear, disgust or their opposites have no public appearance, but it does not mean they cannot flow into the world and become an object or an action. They always could, but now the control over them seems to be more accurate, since individuals can be caught more efficiently through digital life, in which one can now fabricate a “world” for each one. This individual “world”, of course, does not have the thing-character that stabilizes the world and imposes limits to the relation with it. In the individual “world”, no fact or object has the “stubborn thereness” that establishes a common ground to those related to it; it is then prone to be full of lies more or less coherent with each other, but unrelated to the world. These individual “worlds” can be created and there are companies — from the big techs and data collectors to the small fake-news entrepreneurs (BENKLER, 2019, p.9) — making incredible amounts of money by creating these worlds with no public appearance. We do not know in what “world” people very close to us live in.

One of the most common and intriguing experience many Brazilian had in 2018 was the sudden discovery that someone very close — a beloved uncle or aunt, a sister, teacher, or maybe father, mother, husband or wife — now admired the military dictatorship we had, or believed that police should simply kill suspected people, or thought that gay people should be made straight. The shocking surprise became exasperation for many of us who watched, astonished, intentions of voting for Bolsonaro rising one percentual point a day a little before the first round of the elections. We knew something strange was happening, but we did not know exactly where to look at. We still do not know exactly what happened, but we know now that a strong control of the flux of feelings and sensations with no public appearance played an important role in it.

Dampening institutions

Once in office, Bolsonaro's public appearance necessarily gained increasingly clear outlines. The question for him has so far been how to deal with both the images crafted

for individual screens and the unavoidable public appearance imposed by the institution of presidency. It is still too soon to fully grasp his movements, but one can tentatively find a direction in the seemingly chaotic first 18 months of administration. From the perspective here adopted, one sees that Bolsonaro did not give up the “worlds” for individual consumption that his team manipulated during election, but now he must deal with them and with the public light. Keeping a precarious balance between what appears in public and the delusional parallel reality created in Bolsonarian social media ecosystem, he has favored his hallucinated supporters and has by that undermined institutions under his reach. Two elements seem to play a key role here: a certain use of deniable statements and the so-called “cabinet of hate”.

Along the first year of Bolsonaro’s term, press and former allies revealed the existence of a fairly small, but highly important group of rather young advisers lead by one of Bolsonaro's sons, Carlos. This group works in a room a few meters from the President's own room, its members have official positions and their main task is creating and sharing some messages pro-Bolsonaro and a lot of defamatory messages against Bolsonaro's “enemies” — a long list that is generically called “the system” and comprises all the opposition, but also the Supreme Court, the senate, the chamber of representatives, Lula, universities, China, Bolsonaro's former allies, some of his own ministers, press and many others. This small group has been called the “cabinet of hate”, and it was transferred from the campaign team to the government (to its main building!).

The “cabinet” members are now under pressure as justice and the social media companies are after them; *Facebook* has removed dozens of false accounts managed from the “cabinet” due to their “hate” content,⁹ and justice has pursued several different accusations related to “hate”, but also to the legality of a propaganda office paid by public funds and possible electoral crimes during campaign. Despite all the relevance of hate in this context, I would like to draw attention to another aspect of it this group.

Just like the *Cinque Stelle* movement and Nigel Farage's Brexit Party, the cabinet of hate is a very small organization with an incredible capacity of reaching millions of people through social media. Just like these European counterparts, their work seems to foster free and democratic activities — and they openly claim that whenever they can — as they open spaces for people talk and allegedly are not under the yoke of the “system”; but the structure of this “free and democratic” organization is hyper concentrated in one or two people who maintain it under iron fist and work upon highly sophisticated techniques to manage a massive amount of data they keep under lock and key.¹⁰ The activities of the cabinet of hate are not entirely clear, but it seems that this is the hydrant serving a firehose of falsehoods acting inside Bolsonaro’s administration. To be sure: I am not saying that this is the only source of support to Bolsonaro, but it is undoubtedly an important one, and it is certainly a new (and decisive) tool in contemporary politics.

9 See "Facebook removes 73 false accounts connect to the Bolsonaro Family" in Folha de São Paulo. Jul.09.2020. Available in: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/internacional/en/brazil/2020/07/facebook-removes-73-false-accounts-connect-to-the-bolsonaro-family.shtml> See also "Facebook removes pages linked to Roger Stone and Jair Bolsonaro" in. The Guardian. Jul.08.2020. Available in: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jul/08/roger-stone-facebook-pages-accounts>

10 Beppe Grillo and the two Casaleggios, as well as Nigel Farage and Arron Banks, and the small Cambridge Analytica team seem to work under a remarkably similar structure. See Kaiser, op. cit., Wyle, op.cit. and da Empoli, *Engenheiros do caos*.

One of the main features of Bolsonaro's first 18 months as president is the creation of some spaces that are public, but not exactly official. He has, accordingly, avoided or downplayed all official spaces and favored these public but non-official ones. His personal *Twitter* account (just like Trump's) has this character of public, but not official. Bolsonaro also broadcasts weekly lives from his office, but not during “worktime” and not officially. A third initiative is a daily talk to a dozen of supporters in front of his office every morning, when he let himself been filmed as he “listens to the people” and “freely speaks his mind”. In all these occasions, Bolsonaro reproduces the same kind of chaotic and unstructured speech that one can find in comments on social media: feelings and sensations — mainly negative — flowing with (seemingly) no organization whatsoever. Bolsonaro himself, individually — Mr. Jair, so to speak — is actually unable to articulate his speech beyond this point, which unfortunately leads a significant part of analysts to stick to his blatant stupidity¹¹ or to a form of “madness”. It is a mistake to emphasize his stupidity or “madness” simply because it gives us nothing in the fight against Bolsonaro, who after all has a legitimate power in his hands, but mainly because emphasizing his stupidity or “madness” would lead us to simply delegitimize him and would prevent us to see any logic working here.

His logic is not entirely clear yet, but it is already noticeable that the seemingly chaos of his inarticulate speech, combined with the fluid and ephemeral nature of the non-official occasions I mentioned above, give him the possibility of easily denying today what he said yesterday, or reaffirming tomorrow what he denied today. Let us take two examples.

Still during the campaign, Bolsonaro stated, in a live interview with the most important television news, that *Willies: A User's Guide*, the aforementioned child book for sexual education, had been distributed to schools under Haddad's administration (Haddad had been education minister and was then Bolsonaro's main opponent in the campaign). The firehosing process started immediately on social media inflating the revulsion caused by the matter, intensifying all the bad feelings related to it, linking it to the communist threat represented by the main opponent and calling everyone to the urgent task of ending all that. Press denied the claim a few days later, and Bolsonaro returned to the topic on a video recorded *by himself* and shared in *his* social media ecosystem, stating that the book had not actually been distributed to schools in a government official action lead by Haddad, but it had reached many schools and libraries all over the country because government demanded it as free gifts from the publisher.

The movement of this lie is: Bolsonaro brings to public light a discussion that already exists on social media (probably fostered by his own team), and the “information” brought by him has a lie in it. This lie has a verifiable aspect, and press denied *this* aspect:

¹¹ It is hard to show to the international reader the extension and the intensity of his stupidity, noticeable in the constant gaffes and absurd suggestions, but above all in his outstandingly inarticulate speech. Gideon Rachman, columnist of Financial Times, heard from a “prominent financier” in Brazil that Bolsonaro and Trump “are very similar, but Bolsonaro is much stupider. (...) Trump has run a major business. Bolsonaro never made it above captain in the army.” One may resort to Homer Simpson, the famous cartoon character, and say that Trump is smarter than Homer, Bolsonaro is not. (see: “Bolsonaro's populism is leading Brazil to disaster”, Gideon Rachman in. *Financial Review*. May 26.2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.afr.com/world/south-america/jair-bolsonaro-s-populism-is-leading-brazil-to-disaster-20200526-p54wfv2>)

the book is not mentioned in any official document. Bolsonaro backs off on this verifiable element, but, taking a step forward in the thesis of the secret communist plot, reaffirms the secret (therefore shady) character of the government's intentions. He does not deny the false claim that the book was distributed, but only “corrects” the claim about the way the distribution took place. This movement opens to a further “confirmation” of the thesis of the ongoing communist secret revolution lead by “the system”, because it is not unlikely that someone may find (or forge the finding of) the book in a lost library somewhere in the country, record a video and send it to the firehosing center, which will be willing to spread an “information” that was “democratically” sent by a “free” and simple person. Press, which so eagerly denied Bolsonaro's claim, would not turn this finding into news, since it is irrelevant in itself, and this silence would “confirm” that press takes part in the whole plot.

A second example, taken from Bolsonaro administration, may help understand this strange relation between public appearance and the images. In significant parts of the parallel reality that exists in social media, the coronavirus crisis was interpreted as a communist attack against Western civilization. According to it, the “Chinese virus” was part of a great secret plot to destroy our economy and culture, against which one must resist by refusing the mask dictatorship, spreading to the world the good news about the positive effects of hydroxychloroquine against COVID-19, and keeping the economy in motion. These theories were promptly accepted within Bolsonarian social media ecosystem, where influencers added that the opposition was in favor of quarantine and social distancing only to damage economic indices and thus harm the government. This craziness came into public light in different ways. The “Chinese intentions” could not come in a direct and open way, since China is one of the most important commercial partners of the country, and the big money would surely dislike it. But the education minister and Bolsonaro's youngest son dropped references to it and made (racist) jokes against China on their personal *Twitter* accounts; needless to say, the “cabinet” made good use of it. Bolsonaro himself brought it to light by strongly opposing himself to governors who were planning the due measures, and by openly advocating hydroxychloroquine as a treatment that would save lives and keep economy running. Official measures were taken cautiously (the army was ordered to produce hydroxychloroquine; extra funds to health were belated, but not cancelled etc.), but in the non-official spaces that he created (*Twitter*, the weekly lives, the daily talks with supporters), he freely endorsed almost all the elements of the conspiracy theories.

This attitude encountered a significant obstacle in his then minister of health, a medical doctor who decided not to give in to insanity. To overcome the obstacle, the “cabinet of hate” was put into action and picked him as a target of all kinds of attacks and threats on social media. At first Bolsonaro did not say anything against him in official spaces, but kept instigating supporters through his *Twitter* account, the weekly lives and daily talks with supporters, where there often were threats against “those who intend to weak the economy and the country by advocating social distancing”, or “those doctors who refuse to acknowledge that hydroxychloroquine is efficient against the virus”.

This behavior seems to play a double role: first, keep Bolsonaro close to the images found in his social media ecosystem (many produced by the cabinet of hate) and thus to

his supporters; second, pretend to be fighting an epic battle against the system (here represented by the minister he chose). The minister received political support from public opinion in general, a support that “confirmed” his proximity with the “system”; he resisted this open — but not official — opposition lead by his own president for about a month but became powerless and was eventually sacked. A second doctor accepted to be the minister but gave up three weeks later. Bolsonaro replaced this last one with an Army general with no medical experience who accepted the conditions and has been the stopgap health minister since then (by mid-August, he is still the “acting minister”).¹²

Bolsonaro acted in similar way against other ministers, former allies and other institutions (mainly the Supreme Court and the president of the chamber of representatives): he criticizes in his new non-official spaces and puts the “cabinet” into action in order to have support on social media. In the parallel reality that reigns in Bolsonarian social media ecosystem, the health minister *affair* was a battle won by Bolsonaro against the system, and the acting minister's (non) actions are in accordance with that. The acting minister plays a key role in the health front of the battle against the system because he is the official face of the government and, since COVID-19 is “just a flu” and the real threat comes from somewhere else, the acting health minister does not have much to do: the first field hospital built by national government (state governors have built theirs) was inaugurated only one hundred days after the first death, and Bolsonaro visited it unmasked; the funds for the testing and mechanic ventilation were belated and only partially used; a promising vaccine produced by a Chinese laboratory has been treated with disdain. In other words, actually facing the pandemic means giving in to “the system”, means attaching to the pandemic the importance refused by Bolsonaro and his supporters on social media. The task of the health acting minister, i.e. a “soldier” who fights in the official field, is then preventing the institution to work properly, preventing “the system” to keep working.

In June, as the number of deaths rapidly increased, health ministry stopped announcing the numbers. After pressure from public opinion, they resumed the daily announcements, but with a “different method” of counting. Different press agencies then started working together to publish reliable information about the number of deaths caused by COVID-19 and ignored the official number. The ministry has refused to cooperate with states' health departments, and even makes opposition against some governors who are not in line with Bolsonaro. We have reached 100.000 deaths and we still do not have a national plan of action, except the distribution of 5 million pills of chloroquine, a drug that has no proven effectiveness. As a result, we have the undermining of the health ministry itself, as it lost much of its credibility and authority over public opinion.

Other examples could be given as to how Bolsonaro has used the support found on social media to undermine institutions. (Press took some months to learn that government sources deliberately blow false information to let the president correctly deny them at the end of the day and “confirm” the plot of the system against him. There will be a vacant chair on Supreme Court in November, and the president is to name its future

¹² see: "Bolsonaro 'led Brazilian people into a canyon', says ex-health minister" in. *The Guardian*. Aug. 15 2020. Available in: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/15/jair-bolsonaro-luiz-henrique-mandetta-interview-coronavirus>

occupant; Bolsonaro has openly suggested naming some people who had in hand important decisions for him, and whoever will eventually be the chosen one, it will certainly weaken the Court as institution.) It is still too soon to draw definitive conclusions about all that, but it seems clear that the “worlds” created for individual consumption play a key role in the new and frightening political movements in different countries. Modern alienation from the world seems to have gone one step further and these individual “worlds” seem to have found a way to reality. The disturbing result of all that is that digital politics easily shake all institutions that shape the political as a whole.

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