

“Joga pedra na Judith”: hate speech and populism*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to try to point out a possible link between the hostilities suffered by Judith Butler in Brazil and a capture of these conservative demonstrations by political movements. My hypothesis is that a new populism may be in the making. In this sense, the article dialogues with populism theories in Brazil and in the current international context. Butler's work also serves as a backdrop for a reflection of populist politics and how attacks on sexual and reproductive rights serve as fuel to power authoritarian forces with great appeal to the masses.

Keywords: Populism, Democracy, Judith Butler, Human Rights, Conservatism.

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My goal here today is to point out a possible connection between the hostilities suffered by Judith Butler and the incorporation of these conservative demonstrations by political movements. My hypothesis is that we may be faced with the emergence of a new wave of populism in Brazil. In order to develop this idea, I will assume that populism can be characterized by three basic features.¹ First, its content depends on the negation of the other. Populism always appears as anti-something: the establishment, the elite, political parties, certain groups or identities. Second, it presupposes a political theology, as the expression was employed by Carl Schmitt: the secular use of a monotheistic religious concept for the theoretical and practical purposes of politics. Thus populism calls for an unlimited power embodied in a notion of people who “re-occupy” (Arato, 2013) the position originally intended for the “divine” in medieval theories of the origin of the power of kings. Finally, populism is only possible due to the presence of a charismatic leader identified with this unit, i.e., the people. This characterization is somewhat formal, so populism acquires various garments, tailored either for the right or the left. In the brief analysis that I intend to present here, attacks on sexual and reproductive rights are today the best fuel to foster the right-wing version of populism in Brazil.

1. Populism within a context of crisis

In a pioneering work on populism in Brazil, Francisco Weffort draws attention to the fact that populism “can only be

¹ The definition of populism suggested here is similar to that of Jan-Werner Müller (2016). Despite this, I am aware that the most influential theory regarding populism belongs to Ernesto Laclau (2013). Like Laclau, I intend to deal with populism from a formal point of view (which he understands to be “ontological”). However, I find the formulation he presents for the social, understood as a hegemonic order, quite problematic – even if complemented by an idea of “heterogeneity” – since this loses sight of voluntary associations and groups that emerge in civil society. I cannot go much further at this point, but my conception of the social is the same of Cohen and Arato (1992).

understood in the context of the process of political crisis and economic development that originates with the revolution of 1930” (Weffort, 1978:61). The crisis of the agrarian export elite combined with the political weakness of the dominant urban groups, who tried to replace these oligarchies, made populism possible. Given the impossibility of one political group to impose itself on the other, they had to settle the dispute. But this agreement only takes on the contours of a kind of “Bonapartism” thanks to the emergence of the popular classes that arose with urban and industrial development. It is the popular mass that will serve as the ballast of legitimacy necessary to build up the modern Brazilian state.

Getúlio Vargas knew how to use the popular support at his disposal like no other. With the control of the union organization, the use of state propaganda fuelled by a paternalistic ideology, and the implementation of labor legislation capable of appeasing to a certain extent the tension between social classes, he managed to secure support for his autocratic rule. But it would be a mistake to think that during this populist period the masses were passively involved in the exercise of power. Despite Vargas’ dictatorship that would emerge later on, the 1930 revolution brought the institutionalization of the secret ballot and the female vote in 1932, important steps for Brazilian democracy to gradually cease to be a mere formality.

It is true that, according to Weffort, in the 1933 post-revolutionary elections, the percentage of registered voters was only 3.5% of the population. In 1934, before the *Estado Novo*, this figure is 6.5%. Only in 1950 did the proportion of registered voters reach almost half of the population, 46.5% (Weffort, 1978:67). Notwithstanding the lack of participation in elections, populism sought to meet the pressure of the mass of migrants for access to urban jobs, the expansion of consumption and political representation by means of identification with the charismatic leader.

Another version of populism comes with Jânio Quadros. In the 1960 campaign, the first in which electoral propaganda was

broadcast on TV, Quadros made use of a rhetoric filled with references to strict asceticism and portrayed himself as the authoritarian but just leader. With a markedly moralistic discourse since his time as mayor and governor of São Paulo city and state, he personified salaried middle-class social sectors that could not share the hope of receiving personal favors or any sort of patronage. His image alluded to the idea of implacable justice and unconditional equality before the law (Weffort, 1978:35).

According to Weffort, the fundamental distinction between, on the one hand, Vargas’ populism, and, on the other, the populism of Quadros (or Adhemar de Barros, also mayor and governor of São Paulo city and state), is that the former came to aid of implementing a master plan for the country. To be sure, populism was an instrument that, combined with nationalism, enabled the modernization of the state apparatus and the rise of new groups linked to it, such as technocrats and the military. In Quadros’ version, populism was more like a spontaneous manifestation, an expression of someone who translated popular aspirations, although disconnected from the party system (Weffort, 1978:39-40). In the end, Quadros turned out to be a short-term demagogue devoid of great enterprises.

2. The current institutional crisis

I want to provide a snapshot of the forces in contention within the current political scenario in Brazil. I do not intend to offer a causal explanation for the crisis, much less to point out the best way out. It is also important to make historical distinctions of populism as analyzed by Weffort, otherwise we give the wrong impression that history only repeats itself (this time as a “farce”).

We can distance ourselves from the analysis of post-1930 populism due to fact that now there is a wide and effective participation of the people in elections. The paternalistic mode of inclusion of the masses that marked that phase of Vargas populism is a thing of the past. We have also been able to create new forms of political and social organization (parties, trade unions, civil

associations, nongovernmental organizations, etc.) capable of mediating the relationship between state and society, regardless of a close liaison between a charismatic leadership and the popular masses.²

In addition, the institutional configuration of the 1988 Constitution was the result of a compromise between the representatives of several sectors and groups in Brazilian society. It was through this democratic constituent process that rights were secured, interests accepted, and the limits within which future conflicts would be resolved established. Thanks to an active civil society and the political and legal systems responsive to it, democratic legitimacy could be reestablished.

Nevertheless, this scenario seems to be badly shaken today. The deterioration of the fiscal framework has forced an institutional rearrangement that jeopardizes this compromise. The economic elite has an agenda of reforms that finds strong resistance in organized sectors, and, on several occasions, has targeted weaker groups (the proposal to drop pensions below the minimum wage is perhaps the most shameless example). The configuration that made “Lulism” possible, namely, a consumption-led, credit-fueled inclusion of the lower classes without directly confronting the wealthy, may no longer be feasible. The basis of support for the Worker’s Party and the left has also been hard-hit by anti-corruption legal actions and middle class dissent. As a result, there are discontented social groups whose best definition may be that of an “anti-movement”: anti-establishment, anti-pluralist, anti-party, anti-corruption and, above all, anti-politics.³ As if seeking a “genuine democracy,” they end up without developing an autonomous political action capable of penetrating the institutional paths of the shabby party representation. But we are not alone.

² I provide a further account of this in (Neves and Lubenow, 2008).

³ In this aspect, they are similar to fascism (Linz, 1976).

In both the United States and Europe the mechanisms the state has to exercise control over capital and to provide compensation networks for workers has never seemed so fragile. Unlike in the 1980s, the suspension of welfare policies is not a political option today but largely reflects the loss of state capacity to tax and regulate (Rodrik, 2017). And this has important consequences for democracy. It is through popular sovereignty and the self-legislation of citizens that a political community is able to be in charge of its own destiny. When society loses this capacity for self-direction, this compromises the results of the democratic game. Since the end of the Third Way, European politics has found itself unable to reproduce the terms of the compromise between capital and work initiated by social democracy. In an excellent analysis, Perry Anderson shows that Macron is the center's last breath and that a more radical response to these challenges comes from the margins (Anderson, 2017). This radicalism appeared in the campaigns of Bernie Sanders in the United States, Mélenchon in France and Corbyn in the United Kingdom, as well as in the right-wing spectrum, with Le Pen and Trump. The latter knew how to very well exploit the losses of the American lower middle class with a culturalist discourse focused on conservative values (Norris, Inglehart, 2016).

3. A populist alternative?

From one perspective, populism is tempting. Sometimes it can inject a good dose of energy to unblock the political system. With the support of the masses and some ability, the populist leader tries to obtain a surplus of legitimacy that gives them a hegemonic position among political forces. The range of discourses that fuel populism can vary immensely. As pointed out above, one characteristic of populism is to articulate a notion of people-community. This can be done both by the left (a good example is Bernie Sanders' anti-elitist discourse against the 1%) and the right (something explicit in Marine Le Pen's anti-immigrant and xenophobic campaign).

The protests against Butler's visit to Brazil, attacks on a so-called "gender ideology," attempts to modify legislation and even the Constitution to restrict sexual and reproductive rights can be indicative of at least two things. The first and most obvious is a response of conservative groups to changes in the customs and values of Brazilian society at the turn of the century. This must be seen as arising from the plurality of worldviews that democracy promotes. It is also part of democracy and the rule of law that people express themselves in a non-violent way. Unfortunately, intolerance is not an exclusive reaction of the right. To cite just one example similar to what Butler and Wendy Brown faced in Congonhas, Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez was harassed by dozens of protesters in Recife, where she was called a mercenary and a CIA agent. In Salvador, she had to leave the airport by an alternative exit.⁴

The second and most important aspect of these conservative actions seems to be the fact that they are catalyzed by the political system. In the legislative, the initiatives of the Evangelical Bench are well documented (Almeida, 2017) (Prandi, Santos, 2017). Furthermore, it is inherent to any democracy that these groups elect representatives and their agenda will always be part of the political game.

Nevertheless, things get tortuous when one tries to use only religious discourses to justify laws and political decisions that affect all citizens, believers or not. The lack of willingness to "translate" these discourses into more general terms (which could also be endorsed by non-religious citizens) is a symptom that a particular worldview is being imposed. This violates a basic assumption of

⁴ Both events were covered by Brazilian media: <http://g1.globo.com/peernambuco/videos/v/jornalista-cubana-yoani-sanchez- chega-ao-aeroporto-do-recife/2413923/> and <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2013/02/1232373-apos-protestos-yoani-saira-por-porta-alternativa-em-aeroporto-de-salvador.shtml> – last access on 25 Feb. 2018.

democracy and the rule of law: that the state must treat all religions and worldviews with equal concern and respect.

It is likely that the current political crisis has opened up a flank to exclusionary practices and hate speech. The inflammatory rhetoric around moralistic polemics, such as the exhibit at the Queermuseum or Wagner Schwarz’s performance at the Museum of Modern Art (MAM-SP), show how social networks are capable of mobilizing the defense of “our” children, “our” heterosexuality, and ultimately “our” normality as opposed to “perverted” ones whose way of life does not deserve to be respected. Nothing prevents this discourse from being co-opted by an acknowledged leader who speaks on behalf of the only “true” and “legitimate” way of life.

In a political campaign for the executive, however, religious discourse may appear very sectarian, unable to garner the necessary majority of votes. The populist versions that came into effect during Vargas’ and Quadros’ governments in the past seem again more promising. Between the alternatives of a millionaire TV presenter like Luciano Huck, advertised as a new “Father of the Poor,” or the moralistic agenda of the self-proclaimed “not corrupt” Jair Bolsonaro, who pledges to do away with “privileges,” which one will succeed?

By eliminating dissent, populism is very effective in presenting itself as its own reverse. In this sense, an article published by the Brazilian law professor Ives Gandra, which appeared in the state of Ceará newspaper *O Povo*, is illustrative of the “privileges” that populist right-wing rhetoric intends to combat: “I am neither black nor homosexual, nor a Brazilian Indian, nor a robber, nor a guerrilla member, nor a landless trespasser. How do I live in Brazil today? In fact, I am white, honest, a teacher, a lawyer, a taxpayer, a voter, a heterosexual... And all this for what?” It is by promoting this inversion that conservative discourses we are analyzing here today have their utmost importance. Populism has dangerously become a way out of the current crisis, a place waiting to be occupied.

4. Butler and populism

Finally, I would like to use this opportunity and the fact that our debate is also a redress to Judith Butler in order to put into question, *from her perspective*, the very populism I have tried to characterize up to this point. In recent works, where Butler elaborates the ethics of precarious life and concentrates her theoretical efforts on the work of Hannah Arendt, we find a radical critique of the notion of the “people” which populism relies on.

Butler refuses an identity notion of community in the first place. Instead of thinking the formation of a “we” that originates from the denial of the other, from a relation friend vs. foe, Butler argues that vulnerability, loss, and mourning may form “a tenuous ‘we’ of us all.” It is a *coalition* that arises from what she calls “precariousness,” that is, a radical interdependence that we have of on each other. Nothing can be more different from that populist discourse signalled by antagonism.

Reflecting on movements such as Occupy Wall Street and demonstrations at Tahrir Square in Cairo and Gezi Park near Taksim Square in Istanbul, Butler elaborates a notion of “we the people” that calls into question the essentialized concept of popular sovereignty present in many democratic theories. Moreover, Butler points out the existence of a performative dimension in the emergence of a “we the people” prior to any mediation, either by language or demands (in an obvious allusion to Laclau), or sparked by suffered injustices. Assembly, according to Butler, “only makes sense if bodies can and do gather or connect in some way, and then speech acts that unfold from there articulate something that is already happening at the level of the plural body” (Butler, 2015:174).

Butler's theory also serves to reject populism in a second area. The distinction she makes between “popular sovereignty” and “state sovereignty” locates her approach among those that argue that the source of political legitimacy always comes from

outside the state.⁵ Despite not presenting a concept of civil society – insofar as Butler’s “we the people” is mainly a performative formation – she is able to examine the capacity movements like Occupy have to call into question state authority. “Popular sovereignty” and “state sovereignty” always appear as a tension that must not vanish. For this reason, according to Butler,

[a]s long as the state controls the very conditions of freedom of assembly, popular sovereignty becomes an instrument of state sovereignty, and the legitimating conditions of the state are lost at the same time that the freedom of assembly has been robbed of both its critical and its democratic functions (Butler, 2015:163).

Consequently, there is neither a hegemonic articulation in “we the people” that extends from society to the state, nor a totalizing claim. On the contrary, “we the people” is marked by an emptiness that can never be reduced to an identity or fulfilled by the charisma of a leader:

In fact, “we the people” – the utterance, the chant, the written line – is always missing some group of people it claims to represent. Some people fail to show up or are constrained from doing so; many live on the margins of the metropole, some are congregated on the border in refugee camps waiting for documentation, transfer, and shelter, and yet others are in prison or detained in camps ... This means that “the people” never really arrive as a collective presence that speaks as a verbal chorus; whoever the people may be, they are surely internally divided, appearing differentially,

⁵ In an interview to the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, Butler acknowledges that while for Laclau populism cannot remain outside the state, there are sorts of populism “aimed against all state power, hate all state processes, and want to remain in the extra-parliamentary domain” (Butler, 2016). She seems to approve this last version of populist movements. Nevertheless, it is not at all clear why this refusal of state power would be called “populism”.

sequentially, not at all, or in degree, probably also in some measure both gathered and dispersed, and so ultimately *not* a unity (Butler, 2015:166).

It seems symbolic that the last place chosen to offend Judith Butler was the airport, the moment she was leaving the country. By shouting “You are not welcome!” and “Get out!,” her detractors seemed avid to expel something unwanted, which Butler somehow represented. However, it is precisely this emptiness, that is, the absence of Butler, which brought us together at Unifesp here today in this debate. Thank you very much.

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