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Analyses of fascism often evoke an excessive tendency that pulls it beyond the very possibility of its normalization as a political order. This essay suggests that reading a phenomenon like Bolsonarismo through this prism simultaneously identifies something true about its vision and misrecognizes some key aspects of its organization and internal functioning. Attention to the latter—particularly the role played by what the author describes as “political entrepreneurs”—allows us to understand contemporary far right agitation in Brazil as a machine to both stimulate and contain excess. Thus, while the Bolsonarista horizon could be described as something like a *differentially distributed state of nature,* this is not so much some extreme outside of politics than something a lot more continuous with conditions already in existence. This, finally, makes it possible to place the January 8, 2023, attack on Brasília in context.

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Nunes * What the State of Nature Hath Joined Together

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What the State of Nature Hath Joined Together: Bolsonarismo as Horizon and Machine

Analyses of fascism often evoke an excessive tendency that pulls it beyond normal politics and the very possibility of its normalization as a political order. Thus, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) spoke of “black holes,” “a cancerous body rather than a totalitarian state” (1987: 215), “a war machine installed (. . .) in every niche” (1987: 214), and, following Paul Virilio (1976), presented Nazi rule as a form of “suicidal” state (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 230)—the latter, a diagnostic more recently revived by Vladimir Safatle (2020) in relation to Jair Bolsonaro’s handling of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil. Around the same time as Virilio advanced this formula, Foucault (2003: 260) also referred to Nazism as “an absolutely racist State, an absolutely murderous State, an absolutely suicidal State.” In turn, Roberto Esposito (2008: 117) has talked about the “autoimmunitarian paroxysm of the Nazi vision” in which it is ultimately the case that the only way for the nation to “save itself definitively from the risk of death is to die” (2008: 138). For Brian Massumi (1992: 117), finally, a social formation “taking fascism-paranoia to the extreme does not so much self-transform as self-destruct.”

A first thing to note in the examples above is the metonymic tendency to make the most extreme form of historical fascism, German National Socialism, stand for an abstracted, philosophical concept of fascism (even if Massumi stresses that "'fascism-paranoia' is not a terminological substitute for 'fascism' proper"; 1992: 120). It is as if Hitler and his ilk had taken to its logical conclusion something that is always latent in similar historical experiences, and which presumably would, given enough time, come to compromise any attempt at definitive institutionalization: a fascist order is ultimately a contradiction in terms; it is no order at all. The effect of that is to make the uniqueness of the Nazi regime hinge not on the particularities of its context—for instance, the "intrinsically self-destructive" dynamism created by the tension between charismatic authority and the bureaucracy of "the most modern state on the European continent" (Kershaw 2004: 246–47)—but on its more perfect approximation of a concept drawn in its image. Leaving aside the somewhat circular logic involved, this entails that, on top of all the usual lists of criteria one is called to consult in order to decide whether contemporary phenomena should or not be qualified as "fascist" (ideology, social composition, presence or absence of a charismatic leader and an organized movement, etc.), a certain constitutional dysfunctionality or self-undermining essence would need to be considered as well.[1]

On the face of it, the January 8, 2023, attack on Brasília might be taken as evidence of such a tendency in Bolsonarismo. After all, here we had not only an incident of self-described patriots draped in the Brazilian flag vandalizing the main sites of power in the country's capital—the Congress, the Supreme Court, and the presidential palace—but also a costly political move with little hope of success, which helped isolate the outgoing president's followers and gave the new government the occasion to put an end to the protests that had since

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[1] Webber (2020) offers a useful summary of recent debates on whether the label applies to Bolsonaro.

October 2022 demanded his return. Was this the moment in which the fervor inspired by Bolsonaro finally started consuming itself?

In what follows, I would like to propose an alternative interpretation. Instead of looking at Bolsonarismo from the angle of its excessive nature, I will suggest that, like much far-right agitation today, it is better understood as a machine for both the stimulation *and* the containment of excess. This is to say that, while it elicits excessive responses from its participants and exploits that behavior to its own advantage, it does not have wholesale destruction, maximum entropy, or even annihilation as its *telos* or goal—at least not in the mind of its leaders. This does not mean that what it seeks to constitute is a stable order, if by that we understand an ensemble of permanent mechanisms designed to pacify social conflict and coerce or convince its subjects into submission. On the contrary, its ultimate horizon can be described as something like a *differentially distributed state of nature*—an extreme abdication on the part of the state of any responsibility for mediating economic and social conflicts, which allows existing power differentials to go unchecked and exercise themselves directly. Rather than some extreme *outside* of politics, however, that should be understood as a direction in accordance with the natural course of development of socioeconomic conditions already in existence. Thus, whereas making fascism into an anomalous force beyond any control or stabilization tends to “other” the far right, transforming it into some sort of enigmatic strange attractor that takes hold of agents and drags them toward inescapable ruin, I wish to point out the ways in which it remains a thing of this world in both functioning and immanence to ongoing processes. This will then be the basis on which an interpretation of the January 8 attacks will be developed.

Counterpublics and Beyond

I have argued elsewhere (Nunes 2020; 2022a) that Bolsonarismo is best understood as the coming together of several different tendencies that were already present in Brazilian society, shared a common moral grammar, possessed obvious elective affinities with, and had for some time gravitated toward one another. These were exacerbated by a sequence of events in which the key moment was the concomitant eclosion of a massive economic crisis and a corruption scandal involving all major political parties. Actively roused and exploited by various actors, they eventually coalesced around the presidential campaign of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, thus gaining political cohesion, identity, and leadership for the first time. This means that the relationship between Bolsonaro and the social force named after him is not so much analytic as synthetic, and is due less to any particular ideological innovation or qualities shown by him as a leader than to the fact that he was in the right place at the right time, and best positioned to take advantage of a groundswell that had grown largely without an especially significant contribution from him.

Key to this rising wave on whose crest he found himself was the work of what I have dubbed “political entrepreneurs” (Nunes 2022a; Nunes 2022b) agents who take advantage of the affordances offered by digital platforms to simultaneously build political influence and draw financial rewards. The conversion of political into economic capital and vice versa is at once a means and an end for this kind of agent, who turns mounting popularity into monetized online profiles, legacy media visibility, sales of products and services (lectures, courses, consultancies etc.), and, if successful, is eventually able to trade their clout for access to politicians and public funds, governmental appointments, or even an electoral career. This phenomenon was a major reason why the same election that brought Bolsonaro to power saw 85 percent of the senate and

47 percent of the lower house taken by newcomers—a crowd, including several ex-military and even a former porn actor, which a veteran rightwing operator dismayingly described as "social network people."

As I have previously suggested (Nunes 2022b), these political entrepreneurs constitute the backbone of far-right organizing in places like Brazil and the United States today, and that is what helps explain why leaders like Trump and Bolsonaro have managed to build large social bases in the absence of the organized rank-and-file movements for which historical fascism was noted. In Brazil, they include individuals (many of which are alumni of the courses taught by the ur-rightwing influencer Olavo de Carvalho) and groups like Movimento Brasil Livre (Free Brazil Movement), media-savvy young ultralibertarians who successfully exploited the vacuum of political leadership in the wake of the 2013 protests and a corruption scandal that tarnished most of the political establishment. The narrative these agents spun in the context of that scandal and the economic crisis begun in 2014 provided the ideological glue that held together the different elements of which Bolsonarismo was made. It was one in which the put-upon, free-enterprising common man has been browbeaten by a bloated, inefficient state that transformed tax money into kickbacks for politicians and dole-outs to secure the support of the poor, artists, and assorted minorities for the project of transforming Brazil into a totalitarian, family value–shunning failed state like Venezuela. The feedback loop of radicalization these political entrepreneurs established with their audience, each side egging the other on to ever more extreme positions, was essential to moving millions of people further and further out to the right.

Following Nancy Fraser (1997), among others, some have interpreted the social assemblage constituted by these entrepreneurs and their publics as "counterpublics," albeit of a paradoxically "dominant" kind: while "consciously disobey[ing] the rules of decorum instituted by dominant publics" and sharing a perception that they are up against "a culturally dominant horizon," at least during their years in the ascendence and in government, they enjoyed "the greatest decision-making power" (Rocha and Medeiros 2021: 3–4). There has been some pushback against the use of this terminology to speak of rightwing groups on the grounds that, to the extent that they seek to protect and perpetuate existing systems of power and domination, they should rather be understood as "defensive publics" (Jackson and Kreiss 2023). In turn, Brazilian anthropologist Letícia Cesarino (2022: 139) has proposed yet another alternative, borrowing from Victor Turner's (1969) notion of "anti-structure" and Wendy Chun's (2021) "hegemony in reverse" to speak of "anti-structural publics" that not only do not operate according to the logic of universal recognition that is the formal principle of the liberal public sphere, but push toward the "bifurcated recognition" of the friend/foe distinction.

What these discussions show is that we need to distinguish, first, between the specific kind of economic, social, and political power that consists in access to mainstream public discourse, on the one hand, and the broader distribution of economic, social, and political power among different social groups, on the other; second, between the means through which rightwing formations attempt to gather power and influence, on the one hand, and the ultimate horizon within which they move, on the other; and, finally, between, the stated aims of such formations and their actual practice. The first of these distinctions allows us to avoid the conflation decried by Jackson and Kreiss (2023: 5), which leads to "the networked public sphere" being treated as a "battleground for different ideological positions . . . without a conceptualization of social structure or the relative (and historic) power of different social and political groups." The upshot of that disregard is that the "center" of public debate is defined without consideration as to the history of power relations among these groups, and any claims to victimhood are taken at face value as “de facto markers of counter status.” In this regard, the notion of “dominant counterpublics” is definitely a step forward, even if “decision-making power” does not sufficiently discriminate between the economic, social, political, and discursive kinds. Cesarino’s suggestion, in turn, is a step in the direction of the second distinction, insofar as it acknowledges that some groups might instrumentalize public discourse not just to seek recognition within it but to deny recognition and validity to others, and as such to cancel the notion of a public sphere altogether. Rocha and Medeiros (2021: 15) account for this as part of an intrinsically ambivalent dimension of counterpublics, which simultaneously harbor democratizing potentials and “stimulate sociocultural fragmentation and sociopolitical polarization” but still leave open the question: what if a public’s aim is ultimately not to stay within the confines of the liberal public sphere?

While this appears to point us toward the “excessive” nature of the far right again, what needs to be brought into the analysis of a phenomenon like Bolsonarismo is the third distinction, that between stated aims and actual practice. This is something that Cesarino (2022: 184) recognizes when she writes that Bolsonarista publics are for the most part “cooked in ‘low heat’ by lower intensity schismogenic dynamics. Their purpose appears to be not to produce a linear schism (military intervention, civil war) but to sustain a state of permanent schismogenesis in which individuals remain permanently susceptible to influence and in which the overall borders of the democratic system are subtly but progressively forced.”

Yet Cesarino’s ambition to grasp broad structural processes appears to betray her here: the passage is remarkable for the way it plays around with agency, first ascribing it to schismogenic dynamics themselves, then shifting it to the very publics they “cook in ‘low heat’” (“Their purpose appears to be . . . ”). What is elided is precisely the distinction within these publics between political entrepreneurs/influencers and the social base they cultivate, and whose political convictions they simultaneously shape and respond to. Only if we pay attention to this internal functional differentiation is it possible to see low-intensity schismogenesis arise from the oscillation between the deliberate stimulation and containment of excess.[2]

This double movement has two complementary meanings. One lies, as the passage above notes, in the progressive forcing of the borders of the democratic system toward the normalization of extremist discourse (and practice). This is the procedure that I have described by analogy with the mechanism of Internet trolling, which employs the indeterminacy of the framing within which its actions are to be understood, as well as the fact that it addresses two different publics at once (those who are "in the know" and those who are not), to communicate something to its in-group while retaining plausible deniability in case it lands in trouble with the out-group (Nunes 2022a: 74–75). Even if it is occasionally necessary to take a step back and disown a gesture as a joke, rhetorical excess, or misunderstanding, this trick allows those who use it to continuously inject ever more extreme ideas into public discourse: each retreat is to a landscape shaped by previous advances.

The other meaning is to be found in the activity of political entrepreneurs, which is key to the gap between aims and practices. My contention is that, in a movement in which such agents are the main organizing component, the reasons for both advance and retreat cannot be expected to be exclusively ideological.[3] Since the management of a private social, political, and economic capital is for them inextricably bound with broader political goals, their actions inevitably conflate those with personal interests, and if retreating is to be understood as a sign of "playing the game," the game must be understood as taking place at several levels at once—and, in the case of Bolsonarismo in particular, it is the more personal levels that are probably the most important.

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[2] The role of entrepreneurs is acknowledged by Cesarino (2022: 181) when she states that it is not just the spontaneous interaction between users and algorithmic systems that produces bifurcation, but the intervention of a "tactical action layer" consisting of the "coordinated action of users that act as influencers, explicit or disguised." This is said only of the promotion of excess, however, and not of its containment. Elsewhere, she notes that there is an "anti-structural bias" in digital platforms that is "exploited by certain political segments, entrepreneurs etc." (Cesarino 2022: 131), but again this does not appear to encompass those two complementary aspects.

It is in this key that I believe the January 8 events must be understood.

The Riddle of the Pyramid

Even before the start of the presidential campaign—in fact, literally since the January 6, 2021, riots in Washington—it was clear that Bolsonaro was considering an invasion of the Capitol to call his own. Like Trump in 2016, he had already been sowing the seeds, even before the election he won in 2018, of the idea that any result other than a massive triumph would be a sign of fraud and potentially justify the use of force by his supporters. With this, he communicated the most important thing: that, regardless of whether or not they believed their own lies about the electoral process, he and his electoral base would only recognize the will expressed at the ballot box as legitimate if it matched their own.

Yet what eventually unfolded in Brazil was a very different phenomenon from what happened in the United States. However botched, the attack on the U.S. Capitol was the result of a clear strategic calculation. Its aim was to prevent Joseph Biden from being declared victorious, thus preventing his election from becoming a fait accompli and keeping open the possibility that

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[3] This is to mark a difference between movements in which this is the case and those, like the assemblage formed by the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in India, whose social base is not only (or mostly) composed of atomized individuals brought together through social media, but also structured in groups and organizations. Trump's base would be an intermediate case between those two.

Republicans could find a way to hand the presidency back to Trump. In Brazil, the roadblocks and encampments in front of barracks that went on for months after Lula’s triumph in the runoff were an obvious trial run to test the chances of a movement along the same lines. Although they impressed with their size and duration—abetted by funding sources that are yet to be fully identified—they were insufficient to create the conditions for a reversal, especially one involving, as Bolsonaristas expected, the intervention of the military. As a result, by the time of the January 8 events, all relevant deadlines—announcement of the result, certification, inauguration—had been missed, and the possibility of a turnaround become vanishingly remote.

This made the cost of explicitly supporting a coup exceedingly high for any actors who had much to lose. These included Bolsonarista members of congress and the military, however much they might have wanted to join in. In fact, they included Bolsonaro and his family themselves, who since the defeat have been so concerned with minimizing the political and legal risks surrounding them that they refrained from openly leading their troops, or limited themselves to the most timid claim-then-disown troll tactics. Thus, whereas the order for a march on the US Capitol came directly from Trump, none of the top Bolsonarista leadership wanted their fingerprints on January 8.

So who was in charge of mobilizing for the attack on Brasília and in the months leading up to it? The structure of movements organized around political entrepreneurs is akin to that of a pyramid scheme: a multilevel edifice in which each descending layer presides over a smaller public, which may ultimately be that of a single church, friend group, or family, and the relationship among the leaders or influencers in different layers is always symbiotic, those higher up depending on the diffusion that those on lower levels provide while offering leadership, discursive frames, a general model, or even just a focal point in exchange. In the case of

Bolsonarismo, this structure had its quasi-official apex in the shape of the so-called "Hate Cabinet," an informal group including one of Bolsonaro's sons who operated social media relations from within the presidential palace. As the top of the pyramid retreated, it was the middle layers that took the initiative. What the latter understood was that the ebbing of coup-mongering hopes would leave high and dry that segment of the Bolsonarista base that most fully bought into the narratives that sustained it—those for whom Lula's victory represented an imminent existential threat, making any surrender to the principle of political reality a betrayal pure and simple. Keeping this sector alive despite the diminishing chances of success was, for these intermediate tiers, a way of preserving their own base in the face of the risk that the whole edifice could fall apart, while simultaneously establishing their credentials as potential future leaders.

This made the roadblocks, camps, and January 8 events a meeting of two types of people with little to lose: the political opportunists who wished to squeeze the last gains off the good times that were seemingly coming to an end, and the true believers for whom the end of the fantasy of a coup was the end of the world. Behind them, and split between these two categories, were the funders, drawn not from big capital, which had resigned itself to Lula's victory and in any case had too much to lose, but from the lower ranks of the upper classes in which Bolsonaro's most fervent supporters are to be found. These include small family capital and the most backward sectors of agribusiness and extractivism (illegal loggers, gold miners, producers who are less integrated into financial and international markets), for whom the years of officially tolerated Wild West capitalism under the outgoing president had been a golden age.

This social composition and lack of political leverage helps explain why the January 8 insurgence ended up being more expressive and symbolic than strategic. Whereas in Washington the target had been a parliamentary session in progress, the Brasília rioters attacked empty buildings on a Sunday; and whereas Trumpists restricted themselves to trying to coerce legislators, their Brazilian epigones went on a rampage against the three branches of government, in an implicit acknowledgment that no support could be found in any of them. If this was undoubtedly a coup attempt in intention, it was not so in actual fact. Short of the by then very faint hope that the military would use the disturbance as an excuse to step in, there was no plan or power analysis—and, crucially, no support for it among those with real decision-making power.

Not that these did not support *the actions*. On the contrary, many politicians had given them aid or spoken in their favor beforehand in varying degrees of explicitness, and even after the backlash that ensued refused to condemn them. As for the military and police forces, they not only deliberately failed to control the crowds but often guided them into buildings and helped and cheered them on. But they did not—and certainly not for lack of want—support *the coup*. In the end, this was as far as they were willing to go: a show of force that was not meant to be taken to the next level, as the next level would require them to break cover and take risks they were unwilling to take. And since without their mediation the base does not have the institutional means to achieve what it wants, Bolsonarismo's greatest moment of excess was also an exercise in containment, a demonstration of social strength that was simultaneously a confession of political weakness, less Barbarian Invasion than Children's Crusade.

The question that this raises is: what if we misunderstand what much of the far right actually does when we make it into a radical exception or an extreme outside of normal politics, as the philosophical concept of fascism does? What if we give it too much credit when we take its most extreme statements at face value and treat its motivations as exclusively ideological, when they are often of a much baser kind? Whereas talk of “black holes,” “suicidal states,” and “autoimmunitarian paroxysms” suggest that we are dealing with something that inevitably moves toward the destruction of whatever body politic of which it takes hold, the case of Bolsonarismo suggests something else: a form of political parasitism that needs to promote excess in order to build its own power but also contain it in order not to put that very power at risk. Because of the former, this would no doubt lead to an intrinsically unstable order; but the latter suggests that it could potentially become sufficiently normalized so as to continue existing.

None of this is meant to imply that far right leaders do not really believe what they say, or to minimize the risk of the movements they lead. But perhaps we understand their nature better if we see their ultimate horizon being not total destruction but as something much more continuous with what we already have today. It is true that Bolsonarismo ultimately seems to point toward something we could describe as a *differentially distributed state of nature*: a radical abdication of any responsibility for mediating economic and social conflicts that combines the right of the group in power to impose its will in such matters as social mores and free speech with an extremely laissez-faire attitude toward the exercise of power—including brute force—wherever power differentials exist. Yet this is less a radical rupture with whatever exists today than the creeping social Darwinism of years of neoliberal transformation of the state, the economy, subjectivities, and social relations taken to its logical consequences, and is in fact already the way many people experience the world.

Insofar as we can describe this as social disintegration, it is true that a force like Bolsonarismo wishes to accelerate it. Yet the point for those who partake in this acceleration is precisely that disintegration is never complete, and in the increasingly dog-eat-dog world that results from it, they will be the ones who will land on top. Hence the appeal of leaders like

Bolsonaro and Trump, who simultaneously project discipline (against the other) and permissiveness (toward "those like us"). In a world of no-holds-barred competition, they at once beckon with the promise of few constraints on the freedom to compete and represent the prize: arriving at a position where the rules that apply to others, such as paying taxes or being punished for crimes, become optional. Political entrepreneurs do not only wish to lead political movements but to be "winners" in more prosaic senses; and parasites ideally would always prefer to exploit their hosts without killing. This, I believe, offers us a more realistic angle on the meaning and actual practice of much of the far right today.

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