The person in contemporary contexts of right-wing populism: An uncomfortable study

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Abstract

This article arises from the authors' common concerns for the intense dissemination of versions of right-wing populism in Brazil over the preceding decade. The challenge of contemporary anthropology in relation to 'uncomfortable' phenomena, such as right-wing populism and the construction of the person involved in it, was the methodological and ethical focus adopted for this work. To achieve this, the historical antecedents of the phenomenon are revisited, and an overview of classical and contemporary theories and hypotheses are discussed—which enables us to recognise a structured pattern of affects, values, representations and practices that are reactive to enlightened Western modernity. As part of the epistemological and ethical responsibility of anthropological research, this framework offers elements of understanding of the processes through which people are constructed with worldviews that differ from the ideal-typical modern model, centred on the notion of the individual and the universal values involved in the recognition and promotion of human rights.
Keywords: Populism; Person; Right-wing; Individualism; Conservatism; Otherness.

A pessoa em contextos contemporâneos de populismo de direita: Uma pesquisa incômoda

Resumo

Este artigo decorre das preocupações comuns dos autores com a intensa disseminação de versões de populismo de direita no Brasil ao longo dos dez anos anteriores. O desafio da antropologia contemporânea em relação aos fenômenos "incômodos", como o populismo de direita e a construção da pessoa nele envolvida, foi o foco metodológico e ético escolhido para o trabalho. Para isso, revisita-se os antecedentes históricos do fenômeno, e se oferece um panorama das teorias e hipóteses clássicas e contemporâneas a respeito – o que permite reconhecer aí um padrão estruturado de valores, representações, afetos e práticas, reativo à modernidade ocidental ilustrada. Como parte da responsabilidade epistemológica e ética da pesquisa antropológica, esse quadro oferece elementos de compreensão dos processos pelos quais se constroem pessoas com visões de mundo que discrepam do modelo moderno ideal- típico, centrado na noção de indivíduo e nos valores universalistas envolvidos no reconhecimento e promoção dos direitos humanos.
Palavras chave: Populismo; Pessoa; Direita; Individualismo; Conservadorismo; Alteridade.

La persona en contextos contemporáneos de populismo de derecha: Un estudio incómodo

Resumen

Este artículo surge de las preocupaciones comunes de los autores con la intensa difusión de versiones del populismo de derecha en Brasil durante los últimos diez años. El desafío de la antropología contemporánea en relación con fenómenos «incómodos», como el populismo de derecha y la construcción de la persona allí presente, fue el enfoque metodológico y ético elegido para el trabajo. Para ello, se revisan los antecedentes históricos del fenómeno y se ofrece una visión general de las teorías e hipótesis clásicas y contemporáneas al respecto, lo que permite reconocer un patrón estructurado de valores, representaciones, afectos y prácticas, reactivo a la modernidad occidental ilustrada. Como parte de la responsabilidad epistemológica y ética de la investigación antropológica, este marco ofrece elementos de comprensión de los procesos mediante los cuales se construyen personas con visiones del mundo que difieren del modelo ideal-típico moderno, centrado en la noción de individuo y los valores universalistas involucrados en el reconocimiento y promoción de los derechos humanos.
Palabras clave: Populismo; Persona; Derecha; Individualismo; Conservadurismo; Alteridad.

The person in contemporary contexts of right-wing populism: an uncomfortable study[1]

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> —Socrates: Therefore it is clear that those who do not recognize bad things as bad do not desire bad things, but they desire those things which they were supposing to be good, the very things which are, in fact, bad; so that not recognizing bad things to be bad and supposing them to be good, it is clear that they desire good things. Is it not so?
>
> —Meno: These, at any rate, probably do.
>
> Plato (2004), *Meno*, 77

Introduction

As one more front of the constant, delicate advancement of Western anthropological knowledge, here we present those phenomena from the very societies of origin of its practitioners that in some manner are configured as uncomfortable, embarrassing, painful, repugnant, detestable or abject in the light of enlightened, progressive consciousness, almost unanimously characteristic of contemporary humanities.

Many of these phenomena, both public and private, provided the very foundations of modern social thought, from the misery of the proletariat—explained by Karl Marx—to suicide—analysed by Émile Durkheim. Ethnology arose from the challenges of understanding the cultural difference radically represented by small-scale societies (involving 'uncomfortable' themes, including trance, sorcery, immolation, fetishism, headhunting, cannibalism), while psychoanalysis was originally forged to determine this other radical difference that is the unconscious (dealing with the equally uncomfortable madness, nightmare, hysteria, delirium, perversion).

The challenge of contemporary anthropology in relation to uncomfortable phenomena is distanced from sociological thought and continues the ethnological and psychoanalytic adventures, since it is tasked with understanding them from within—and not merely as supposedly objective external data. There has been a great deal of reflection on what this 'inside' knowledge might mean and how it might work, giving rise to several valuable interpretative lines. Without going into details, it is sufficient here to highlight the interest and need to extend this disposition—*sine ira et studio*—to the study of the phenomena that concern us here: right-wing populism and the construction of the person involved in it.

The central axis of modern Western cosmology is the rationalist heritage of the Enlightenment, with its complex political-ideological apparatus (liberalism, individualism, egalitarianism, citizenship, democracy) and its techno-scientific instruments. It is based on doubt (Descartes) and uneasiness (Locke), and operates within the framework of an open temporality, always ready for transformation and improvement (Rousseau)

1 This text arises from work conducted for a subject within the Post-graduate Programme in Social Anthropology at the National Museum/Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, entitled '*Configurações da pessoa em contextos contemporâneos de populismo de direita (com vistas ao caso brasileiro)*' [Configurations of the person in contemporary contexts of right-wing populism (regarding the Brazilian case)], and taught jointly by the authors in the first half of 2023, due to common concerns with the intense dissemination of versions of right-wing populism in Brazil over the previous decade. The authors are grateful to the students for their contributions to the debate and to Wagner Alves da Silva for the stimulus represented by his dense ethnographic thesis in this regard (2023).

– the sting of the ideas of progress and avant-garde. Since the eighteenth century, the historical experience of Western culture is the result of this disposition; however, always in an approximate form, never completed, and rather permanently contradicted by real circumstances.

The human sciences, established from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, inherited the impulse of general Enlightenment action, but were committed precisely to the challenge of understanding the 'residues' of the great project, its external and internal borders and fringes. Therefore, they are essentially sciences of the negative, the opposite of hegemonic or official self-consciousness—a constant, delicate project, as we have said. Constant, because not only does social life move without ceasing, but both life and understanding are driven by the peculiar dynamism of modern Western culture. Delicate, since inverted attention always requires ample vigilance regarding the resilience of the weave of this rare double-sided fabric.

As a counterpoint to the later defence of axiological neutrality, *Wertfreiheit*, formulated by Max Weber (1949 [1904], 2004 [1919]), we find in a text by Émile Durkheim (apud Lukes 1969 [1898]) what could be considered the first clear demonstration of the double-sided thinking: the scientist has to analyse the values at play in the phenomena they focus on, even those closest to them, observing them as strange, while understanding that they carry their own values—and that these cannot be discarded, but rather respected in a challenging, ambivalent game. Durkheim did so precisely in relation to 'individualism', both an object of analysis and a foundation for the action of modern intellectuals—including the author himself.

It can be reasoned that a certain symmetry retains that 'valuable' object with the 'uncomfortable' object, since they are both challenging—which reveals that the discomfort is not intrinsic to the object, but arises from the attitude with which it is observed. In the case of 'individualism', it consists of focusing on what is valuable as ordinary; while in the case of the 'misery of the proletariat' (Marx 2009 [1852]), for example, it consists of focusing on the ordinary as valuable. The uncomfortable objects that are faced here are rather similar to Durkheim's attitude, since we seek an 'emic' rather than 'etic' approach (Hahn *et al*. 2011), which seeks to understand the motives of its agents.

At the time Durkheim analysed it, individualism was a negative trait, synonymous with 'egoism'. Despite this, the analytical attitude observed it not merely as negativity, but as a structuring value of meaning and action in the world. Similarly, in our time, the category 'populism' is negative; however, the analytical attitude that we favour seeks to recognise it as a structured core of values, which cannot be reduced to folly or hallucination. The difference is that Durkheim rightly perceived that his attitude was inseparable from a positive dimension of individualism itself; which is not reproduced in our case—because of how significantly distant we feel in relation to populism (particularly in the case of right-wing populism).

Thus, it is important to begin to discern how this challenging phenomenon can be recognised, which includes the issue of distinctions between 'right-wing' and 'left-wing' populisms—canonical in the contemporary imagination and pre-eminent in our analytical option.

In their now highly respected work on the risk of death of democracies, Steve Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt provide the following definition: 'Populists are anti-establishment politicians—figures who, claiming to represent the 'voice of the people,' go to war against what they describe as a corrupt and conspiratorial elite' (2018: 22). Furthermore, they define certain signs of populist risk to democracy:

> We should worry when a politician 1) rejects, in words or action, the democratic rules of the game, 2) denies the legitimacy of opponents, 3) tolerates or encourages violence, or 4) indicates a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media. (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018: 22)

Some of the essential features are outlined: a fundamentally 'political' configuration that involves authoritarianism, as opposed to democracy; arbitrariness, to the detriment of the due course of current law; violence, outside the state apparatus, or even occasionally and illegitimately within it. What completes the

characterisation, however, is the justification in the name of the 'people'—as opposed to the 'elites' or the 'system/establishment'. If all this is then combined with the delegitimisation and systematic persecution of opponents, ideologically defended and justified in a fight against democracy—fascism is already being formed.

These characteristics are common to populist movements that conform to the right and left of the political spectrum. The difference is found in the way in which the justifying rhetoric (and the resulting policies) are constituted, sometimes indicating the conservation or restoration of historically situated differentiating hierarchical values, and the promotion of freedom in relation to the state and the market; sometimes indicating the renewal or replacement of the current socio-political system, with a view to a universally progressive horizon of freedom, equality and autonomy.

In this paper we deal almost exclusively with right-wing populism, since not only is it that which has been most widespread (as a reality or as a programme) in the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is also that which most unanimously troubles our enlightened, progressively inclined conscience. Despite this, some of our literate references treat these alternatives as variants of the same phenomenon; just as much of that presented here as characteristics and interpretations is also applicable to left-wing populist regimes and programmes[2].

By highlighting the fact that right-wing populism proposals are currently becoming widespread, through our choice, we explicitly take into account the impact of Brazil's specific historical experience between 2019 and 2022, in which a federal government elected at the end of 2018 inspired and sought to put the model in question into practice.

The theme of populism, although paradigmatically political, is also inevitably cultural, in the broadest sense of the theme; it involves values, affects, representations and practices. Like every ideological system, it permeates the very constitution and agency of the subjects of the public arena, legally recognised persons.

The debate regarding the configuration of the person constitutes a classic thread of anthropological investigation, either explicitly or as an underlying dimension of practically all themes and analytical investments. There is no socio-cultural experience without its agent supports, whether we call them individuals, persons, subjects, selves or actors. Briefly, it is worth clarifying that the convention used here when navigating a multivocal and controversial nomenclature is one proposed by Louis Dumont in his theory of hierarchy and his analysis of the ideology of individualism (Dumont 1986a; Duarte 2012): 'person' is the designation of each and every entity that has the capacity for agency, both those that Dumont calls 'biopsychological' and all those that each culture considers similar, equivalent or substitutes. 'Individual' is the designation of an ideal model of person characteristic of modern Western culture, composed of the complex (and not always synchronous and univocal) bundle of values of freedom, equality, autonomy, and uniqueness.

On an ethnographic level, what most encouraged us to author this text was precisely the understanding of the processes through which people are constructed with worldviews that differ from the ideal-typical model of enlightened Western modernity, characteristically centred on the notion of the individual. This discrepancy has regularly resulted in the disqualification of those who express it, as an expression of savagery, ignorance and backwardness, imposing serious discomfort on those who endeavour to understand it and not just belittle or denounce it.

Both of us have already dedicated ourselves to the subject of the person in previous works, whether in relation to models of physical-moral suffering, relationships between family and religion, or internalisation mechanisms – in the case of Luiz F. D. Duarte (2009; Duarte & Menezes 2017; and others)—or in relation to intra-domestic violence and the work of inculcating modern values in men who abuse women—in the case of Marco J. Martínez-Moreno (2024; 2022a & 2022b).

2 The dichotomy between left and right, on a political and ideological level, is a matter of constant discussion and controversy. In a canonical work, Norberto Bobbio (1997) seeks to de-reify these terms, drawing attention to the relational and situational character of the classification. See also Chantal Mouffe (2002), *inter alia*, on 'right-wing populism'.

The challenge of anthropological research on right-wing populism

Since the 1980s, anthropology has focused its attention on the vulnerable, subaltern and, fundamentally, suffering subject. This is a shift resulting from decolonisation movements and criticisms of ethnographic authority that possess an implicit sense of justice, inspiring critical anthropological work conducive to the transformation of the social, economic and political conditions that reproduce colonialism. Joel Robbins (2013) relates this shift to anthropologists' interest in documenting the 'subjectivity' of their now research interlocutors—leaving behind reflections on the 'culture' of natives located in the antipodes. This is a transformation in the politics of knowledge production that, moreover, transferred the geographical imagination concerning the good and bad savage to the ethnographer's own society (Trouillot 2003).

This change made it easier to conduct ethnography at home and assign relevance to reflections on the forms that relations of power and domination acquire in the anthropological agenda (Ortner 2016). Thus, researchers began to participate in a public anthropology agenda that sought to understand processes of victimisation, participate in the resolution of 'social problems', and contribute to the consolidation of identity politics.

Within the economy of knowledge production in social sciences, this framing relinquished the oppressor or perpetrator of violence, with whom the anthropologist was unable or unwilling to establish the much-appreciated bond of 'empathy' during fieldwork (Shoshan 2016, 2024—in this issue; Martínez-Moreno 2022a). This had methodological consequences in the description and analysis of the contexts studied: that of not contemplating the meaning of the practices of the agent who exercises power, whose position is unacceptable for the ethnographers, given their political and affective commitments to their interlocutors. On the other hand, its visibility in anthropological works is subject to 'orientalising' (Harding 1991) descriptions – which reproduce the imaginary on the bad savage, those who do not recognise the true causes that animate the world, whose practices eventually reveal irrationality when confronted with the objectivity of scientific knowledge (Winch 1964).

Saba Mahmood (2001) draws attention to the fact that the secular-liberal 'architecture of the self', implicit in the conceptualisation of the human person in modern law (Mahmood 2009; Dullo 2019) and the anthropological agenda described above, reveals methodological problems in the description and analysis of the agency of subjects who offer no signs of resistance to domination. The approach to right-wing populisms, then, faces the challenge of understanding forms of person that do not correspond to the discrete unity privileged by science and modern law (Duarte & Menezes 2017). This is not a moral relativism nor a nihilism, which refuses to criticise the inequalities prevailing in the world. It is an exercise in analysing and understanding ideologies and practices that seek to preserve old values and institutional arrangements as a 'reaction' to political, economic and social interventions focused on consolidating the paradigm of liberal, 'modernising' citizenship.

It seems to us that this is a question of method that seeks to elucidate what Thomas Cortado (2023) calls 'progressive prejudice'—also a subject of reflection by Eduardo Dullo (2015), under other categories—and take the political discourses of the 'conservative Other' seriously, much like anthropology deals with themes like the place of animals and humans in the cosmos. This disposition includes the way in which this Other may or may not appropriate progressive notions and values, such as equality and democracy. Faced with this challenge of understanding, Tim Ingold's proposal for anthropology as 'philosophy with the people in' is shown to be relevant, in that it asks us 'to share in their presence, to learn from their experiments in living, and to bring this experience to bear on our own imaginings of what human life could be like, its future conditions and possibilities' (Ingold 2018: 9).

Agreeing with the need expressed by authors who have recently taken on the challenge of 'understanding' an emic point of view of the conservative Other, which makes us uncomfortable, forms part of the ethical responsibility of anthropology to present the profile and nuances of these actors, though without idealising them (Harding 1991; Shoshan 2014, 2016, 2021, 2024; Pasieka 2017; Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco 2021; Coelho 2023; Martínez-Moreno 2024).

The panorama presented here seeks not only to understand the form of the person within the configurations of right-wing populism, but to provide elements of academic and political judgment of expressions of agency that cannot be understood without reference to their progressive or liberal counterpart. As Jimeno (2018) previously expressed in relation to the practice of anthropologists in Latin America, research involving the conservative Other, which makes us uncomfortable, expresses a tension between the theoretical orientations of our discipline and the practical engagements that make authors citizen-researchers.

The methodological and ethical dilemma thus defined is expressed in this same text: the authors felt constantly challenged to create a more emic perception of the right-wing activist, knowing themselves incapable of transcending their antipodal position to this configuration at every stage. This is an insurmountable condition – and its effects form part of this analytical contribution.

Historical summary

The political phenomena examined here are characteristically 'modern', that is, they arise from the 'great transformation' (Polanyi 2001) that characterised social relations in the Western world from the eighteenth century onwards, involving the Industrial Revolution, the Scientific Revolution, the predominance of a (liberal) mercantile economy, the constitution of a 'public sphere' relatively independent of the state, the growing prestige of a democratic political order (based on representation), and—although in a sphere only apparently diverse—a deepened feeling of personal uniqueness and the need for its autonomous cultivation (including both rationality and sensitivity).

The capitalist mode of production, which became largely hegemonic, imposed a radical modification of relations between classes, with the expropriation and pauperisation of the popular classes, the expansion of the middle classes, and the enrichment of the elites. It was also a time of a planetary consolidation of the colonial enterprise, involving the stabilisation of shared world markets along the Euro-American axis.

Large cities, swollen by expulsion from the fields, began to contain growing contingents of proletarians and sub-proletarians, available for a new type of political action, of which the preliminary popular movements of the Glorious Revolution and, later, those of the French Revolution were early manifestations. Urban mob uprisings became continually possible in the new social ecology.

Located among these masses and the economic and political elites, the middle classes grew in number, quality and influence, associated with the spread of literacy and high culture. They functioned as a fundamental piece in the new public order, since they included liberal professionals, technical specialists and 'intellectuals', who, for the most part, controlled the notable expansion of education, collective communication resources[3], and the artistic production, which was increasingly organised and prestigious.

Political life had been profoundly challenged by new conceptions of 'representation', characteristic of the democratic and 'republican' order. The contractualist theories of the modern state postulated the participation of each citizen in the management of the common thing, although in highly varied and inevitably conflicting ways.

The parliamentary form, particularly that elaborated in British history, would regularly impose itself based on individual voting, though this was still census-based and androcentric. The subject of political representation was an 'individual' endowed with the ideal properties of freedom and equality, which would guarantee them the necessary discernment to participate in the collective order. The liberal political model tended to follow liberal economic theory, favouring the expansion of capitalism, while sharing with it the most varied historical vicissitudes.

It was in this context that the first manifestations emerged of what would eventually by recognised as 'populism' and 'right-wing'. The phenomena that came to be described by the first category were those in

3 On the emergence and influence of theatre, cafes and newspapers in the new configuration of the public sphere and the modern moral subject, see the classic *La Souffrance à Distance* by Luc Boltanski (1993) [Distant suffering: morality, media, and politics].

which political men made use of the new means of communication and the high concentration of urban masses to publicise their programmes, invoking the pre-eminence of the actor 'the people' in dissensions and contentions regarding public governance. In the French Revolution, some politicians, such as the Count of Mirabeau, Maximilien Robespierre and Georges Danton, specifically expressed this praise of the people against the unworthiness of the elites (Dudley 2016). This concerns 'left-wing' populism, if we adopt its general contemporary meaning, since it abhorred the past and aimed to build a universal future.

As is well known, it was in this very context that the opposition between a 'left' and a 'right' was formalised, depending on the position taken by the parties in relation to the presiding board of the *États Généraux*—which later became the *Assemblée nationale*—in which the revolution took place. Formalisation regarding the constitutional powers attributable to the king occurred on August 28, 1789: on the right were those who defended their preservation; on the left, those who stood against these powers. Right then, the opposition between 'conservation' and 'renewal' was already emerging, in a configuration that would prove to be lasting.

A genealogy of the general possibilities of modern politics, and within it, of the manifestations of the 'right' in the contemporary world, thus crystallized. The most general trait is that of the 'reaction' to signs of the dissemination of the modern, revolutionary, progressive or liberal worldview—leading to the stabilisation of accusatory categories: 'conservatism', 'reactionism', and 'authoritarianism'.

Still in the nineteenth century, two other model manifestations of populism emerged: Russian and American. The first, which emerged in the middle of the century, praised the Russian people, against the cosmopolitan westernisation of the elites and in favour of a type of agrarian socialism—respectful of peasant forms of production. It obeyed a general romantic influence and, particularly in its initial phase, was carried by intellectuals and artists (narodnichestvo movement). Its influence only ended with the victory of the Russian Revolution and its 'modernising', collectivist policy for the countryside.

The second emerged towards the end of the century—although President Andrew Jackson can be considered an emphatic precursor, in the 1830s —based on a revival of the tradition of local American 'communities', with a strong emphasis on small property and opposition to state and large economic corporations. The political party that represented the movement at the end of the century (the People's Party) quickly ceased to exist—and the most recent manifestations of populism in the US political scene are of a very different order.

In both cases, there are characteristics of general (including political) praise for 'the people' and a conservative disposition in relation to pre-modern conditions of property and work. Rural life plays a fundamental role in this, with everything leading to the characterisation of a 'right-wing' movement. This type of populism has since appeared in other forms and local contexts, without the same political importance, until the emergence of Latin American variants and major right-wing political movements, both occurring between the world wars.

The ideology of the right was expressed in several other ways until World War I: racism, conservatism, reactionism, authoritarianism, ultramontanism, and degenerationism are several of the descriptive categories. All were eventually associated with populist perspectives, whenever they inspired effective political programmes. After the war, Italian Fascism and German Nazism came to be established and implemented, along with numerous additional movements of very similar political content in other countries. All contained a populist dimension (*völkisch* in Germanic thought; from *Volk*, meaning people), including the dictatorial regimes implemented in Latin America during this period, such as those of Juan Domingo Perón, in Argentina, Getúlio Vargas, in Brazil, and Lázaro Cárdenas, in Mexico.

The main ideological emphasis of populism consists of advocating the virtues of 'the people', as a repository of traditional wisdom, more or less linked to a heritage of blood, territory and customs (including religious practices). This creates an opposition to the elites, who are considered cosmopolitan—not rooted; degenerate—not authentic; pretentious—not spontaneous; artificial—not 'natural'. Opposition can affect the political classes

as a whole (the political 'system'), intellectuals (artists, journalists, scientists, teachers) or large institutional forms (the state, the press, the banks, large industry, religious institutions, the justice system).

Before moving on to our examination of classical theories on populism, it is worth presenting an anthropological hypothesis consistent with the historical circumstances that we have briefly reviewed. The coincidence between the advancement of egalitarian and liberalising dispositions characteristic of 'modernity' (like those of contractualist theories and the French Revolution) with the emergence and proliferation of conservative movements, such as right-wing populism, suggests the convenience of evoking the hypothesis of anthropologist Louis Dumont on the resistance of the 'hierarchical principle' in the implementation of social forms inspired by the 'ideology of individualism'. According to the author, hierarchy, as a cosmological principle and social system based on the 'difference' between the terms of any relationship, consists of a universal property of the human condition. In some rare sociocultural formations, ideal models of 'equality' between the terms have emerged, with maximum expression in the 'ideology of individualism', another name for the configuration that we evoked just now under the species of values of equality, freedom and autonomy of social subjects and the segmentation of the domains of knowledge and practice. In his 1983 article on racism and individualism in Adolf Hitler, Dumont (1986b) applied this analytical scheme to understand one of the most radical and devastating manifestations of populist reactionism, demonstrating how the conservative position is fundamentally a reactive manifestation of the hierarchical principle grappling with its individualist antagonist—but within a socio-historical context already marked by the hegemony of the 'individualist' order. Reaction and resistance are clear notes of this social form.

Ernesto Laclau (2005), in his canonical work on populism, found a similar analytical disposition in the work of Hippolyte Taine (1875), although merely descriptive:

> for Taine, society can only open the doors to homogenising forces at the expense of its internal cohesion. The equalisation of conditions can only mean the breakdown of all hierarchy and differentiation, that is, the collapse of the social order (Laclau 2005: 85).

For an author who is himself conservative, the result of the dissemination of individualism could only redound to the 'anarchy' that he perceived at home in republican France. This diagnosis was frequently repeated in the justification for implementing right-wing regimes, attributing the expectation of order to a mandate of the people.

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A section—like this one—dedicated to the 'historical' contextualisation of uncomfortable phenomena is relatively sheltered from the effects of such a condition. The distance in time and ethics interposed between the facts evoked, their coeval and contemporary interpretations, produces an effect of cushioning the bad feeling. In truth, the greatest risk are anachronistic assessments, motivated by hostile feelings arising from current coexistence with continued variations of the phenomena studied.

'Classical' theories

There is a set of analyses of right-wing populism to which the quality of 'classical' can be attributed, since these have propagated for a long time in erudite circles, enjoy widespread respect, and mark many of the interpretative possibilities still ongoing today. We refer, exemplarily, to the century-old ambit that extends from Karl Marx [1852] to Hannah Arendt (1973 [1951]) and Theodor Adorno (1950), passing through Gustave Le Bon (1895), Sigmund Freud (1949 [1921]) and Max Weber (1978 [1922])—and among which we shall highlight the main analytical clues.

Despite the great difference in their analytical matrix and the historical materials they wrote about, both Marx and Weber discern a specific societal location for the bearers of right-wing ideology. Marx describes what he calls *lumpen* groups (in principle, but not only, the lumpenproletariat) with considerable precision; while Weber points to 'subordinate groups' in modern societies.

Among Marx's works, the one that best addresses the immediate political practice of his time is *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (2009 [1852]). It is an analysis of the construction of the coup through which Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew transformed himself from president to emperor of France, in 1851; emulating the analogous act of his ancestor on the fateful date of the 18th Brumaire. Driven by the populism of L. Napoleon, the lumpenproletariat, the 'scum' of social life, appears as an indispensable actor in the events, whose importance was then seen to have increased due to the systematic policy of the atomisation of society, undertaken through the systematic voiding of political representation by class.

In several texts, Weber dealt with personal feelings that tended to respond to conservative demands in the context of religious life, the main axis of his mature analyses. He was probably the first to highlight the psychosocial condition of 'resentment'—associated with the life of a pariah people—as a driving force behind that reactionary moral configuration. He emphasised the 'moralism' that tends to characterise the configuration, together with a strong desire for 'revenge' against those allegedly responsible for their disadvantage. He stressed the importance of anti-rationalist resistance from subordinate groups, arising from the way modern intellectualism despises and represses magical beliefs. He also evoked the 'need for just compensation (...) involving reward for one's own good deeds and punishment for the unrighteousness of others' (Weber 1978: 492).

Another fundamental theme of classical analyses of populism is that of 'suggestion' or 'influence'. Its most notable systematiser was Gustave Le Bon, who published his *Psychologie des Foules*[4] in 1895. As mentioned, the emergence of the urban masses as an important social phenomenon was still recent and raised widespread questions and concerns, in the frequent category of 'crowd' (Le Bon's *foule*). In *Psychologie des Foules*, Le Bon analytically systematised an abundant literature on the emergence of the phenomenon of 'masses' in Europe, from the end of the eighteenth century onwards. The author describes the mechanisms of influence, suggestion and leadership involved, highlighting the unconscious and intellectually impoverished nature of the crowd's behaviours—full of illusion, exaggeration, affective mobilisation, conservatism and intolerance. However, he sought to understand and not merely judge the phenomenon—a fact that has made him rightly renowned to this day.

As part of his research in psychopathology, Sigmund Freud described a complex psychic apparatus in the states of crowds, with correlated characteristics of inner dynamics, seeking to articulate the social and individual dimensions of the phenomenon, as suggested by the two-part name of his main work on the subject, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1949 [1921]). He made extensive use of Le Bon's indications, returning to themes on the prevalence of feeling over reason and the loss of cognitive and moral discernment. His analysis focused on childhood processes of 'identification' and 'object cathexis', leading to eventual collective 'idealisations' in adulthood, such as identification with a leader. The two main processes are those of 'identification of the ego with an object and the replacement of the ego ideal by an object'[5].

Hannah Arendt dissected the phenomenon we discuss here in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973 [1951]), from different angles and with great analytical acuity, relying on the abundant material (and personal experience) of Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism. She returned to Marx's characterisation of the 'rabble' to distinguish it from the 'mass', describing the latter's characteristics of fanaticism and 'stubbornness of conviction' as those

4 The book was quickly translated into English as *The Crowd: A study of the popular mind* (1896).

5 The themes on the crowd—and the influence that animates it—intensely permeated the literature of nascent social psychology, from Hippolyte Taine and Gabriel Tarde, on the more sociological side, to Jean-Martin Charcot, Hippolyte Bernheim and William McDougall, on the psychiatric and psychological side—cf. Laclau 2005: 49-56.

who 'can be reached by neither experience nor argument', detailing the effects of the 'breakdown of the class system' (to the detriment of the 'masses') and the consequent ruin of the party system, exploring the effects of the atomisation and individualisation of mass elements and, finally, describing the temporary alliance between the elites and the rabble as part of a movement of those outside of history that legitimise populist regimes—among many other topics of permanent relevance.

Theodor Adorno revisited the theme of 'ignorance' and 'confusion' prevailing among those who cultivate an 'anti-intellectualism'—'the stubborn refusal intellectually to penetrate reality'—in his classic book *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), based on extensive and multifaceted research conducted in the United States. He explored the childish nature of the 'anguish' that prevails therein, which simultaneously leads to a comforting stereotype and a feeling of 'magical omnipotence'. He discusses several of the morphological traits that we examine later (particularly that of the atomisation of social subjects due to the rupture of traditional relationality) and elaborated complex psychosocial interpretations of behaviour that he calls 'pseudo-conservative', associated with fascism—as an extreme political form of reactionism.

As far as we can ascertain, Georg Simmel did not directly study the phenomenon of the crowd (and its possible political corollaries), but he clarified what he called the 'soul life' of city dwellers in so many ways that much can be learned of his analyses, particularly in *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben* (1903) [*The metropolis and the life of spirit* (apud Boy 2020)]. The point that seems most pertinent to us is his analysis of the contrast between the 'intellectualist' character of life in the metropolis and the 'sentimental' character of the spirit and relationships in small towns. When reading it, you can project an analogy between the inhabitant of the small town he had in mind, in Germany, and those on the outskirts of large cities (like Herbert Gans' 'urban villagers'), where masses of 'sentimental' and 'anti-intellectualist' people in the works of previous authors were already growing.

This review of the main relevant classical theories ends with a work of fiction by Jean-Paul Sartre, which we consider exemplary in its embodied dissection of the psychosocial evolution of a subject who embraces fascism in a context that immediately precedes World War II: the novel *La naissance d'un chef* (Sartre 1981 [1939]), published in the *Le Mur* collection. Sartre demonstrates a process of increasing psychological 'inauthenticity', inseparable from various family and socioeconomic characteristics, which leads the subject to join youth groups animated by the reactionary messages of the time, ready to join any mass populist call. The theme of inauthenticity is inseparable from the way in which Sartre more abstractly developed that of 'bad faith', especially in *L'Être et le Néant* (Sartre 2000 [1943]). These themes of 'inauthenticity' and 'bad faith' vividly pertain to the consistently evoked 'resentment'.

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A relative shelter from the 'discomfort' of themes like fascism, populism, and reactionism can also be encountered in this century of critical analysis of modernity and anti-modernity, as we perceived with respect to the historical review: even though there is no temporal distance between the event and the interpreter, a powerful ethical and cognitive alibi prevails. It is thus necessary to describe and analyse the events that are considered dangerous in such a way that any personal feelings and sensations contribute to and do not hinder their exposure. It is true that the conditions of analysis of Marx, Weber, Simmel and Le Bon, on the one hand, and of Freud, Arendt, Adorno and Sartre, on the other, are very different. The latter group had to deal directly with Nazi fascism, the most radical and virulent version of right-wing populism, feeling its effects in the flesh—so to speak. This is how the first symptoms of the malaise of self-experimentation appear with regard to the resentful 'discomfort' with the phenomena analysed and with the very act of focusing on them – which Sartre developed more explicitly. As Marx said in *Das Kapital*, albeit in relation to other dimensions of the social world, '*de te fabula narratur*'.

Contemporary descriptions and interpretations

Contemporary descriptions and interpretations of phenomena linked to right-wing populism are abundant, drawn from a broad literature, from which we now highlight the main clues organised in recurring themes.

It is important to clarify that in this analysis—following a trend in the literature reviewed—we essentially focus not on the social segments from which the great ideological configurations of 'reactionism' originally emerge (in principle, the intellectual fractions of conservative socioeconomic elites), but rather on the 'popular' segments, which adopt and re-elaborate them creatively and situationally.

The first theme is the very general characteristic of phenomena of a global nature, organised in a multiplex or multi-scalar approach, taking advantage of the recent, intense and widespread reorganisation of the media through the virtual world. This does not imply homogeneity; on the contrary, this multiplex or multi-scalar character points precisely to the intense flexibility (and eventual fragmentation and encystation) of this global current.

The second theme is the sociogenetic hypotheses for understanding the phenomenon. Classical analyses had already prompted them, beginning with Marx and Weber, highlighting the dynamics between social classes throughout the modernisation processes. Now, explanatory characteristics have reinforced or added to these, including radical changes in the labour market in late capitalism (outsourcing, atomisation, precariousness, depersonalisation, commodification), the experience of precarious life on the outskirts of large cities (stigma, misery, violence, lack of life perspectives), and exposure to situations of rupture in relationality and social expectations (unlike mere lack, this concerns the feeling of frustration regarding possibilities that seemed to be emerging). This topic also includes the observation that the growing integration of peripheral populations into the capitalist order is not accompanied by access to fuller citizenship—quite the opposite (Gracino *et al*. 2021).

The feelings of injustice, frustration and humiliation felt by certain social groups tend to provoke an emphasis on radical antagonism and the search for the destruction of others, through attitudes of verbal aggressiveness and physical violence towards groups seen as favoured (Castro Rocha 2021). Scapegoats can be sought (Cesarino 2022), feeding a 'rhetoric of hate' (Castro Rocha 2021), with the consequent suppression of the basic political antagonism necessary for modern public order (Mouffe 2002).

In the case of Brazil, over the last decade, the experience of antagonism between groups or classes involves the emerging resentment against the egalitarian policy of supporting the emergences of minorities and defending 'human rights': the poor, women, LGBTQIA+, Black people, Indigenous people, peripheral populations, foreigners, and so forth. Gracino et al. see in this a constant 'criticism of inclusion discourses and policies, aimed at minorities (symbolic, economic and demographic)' (2021: 549)[6].

The third theme is that of contrastive reaction, mentioned in the Introduction. In effect, the constitution, diffusion and complexification of the phenomenon is characterised by a term-by-term opposition to the structuring values of the liberal, individualistic worldview, which is considered the very core of modernity. There is a more objectivist dimension, which is opposed to socioeconomic characteristics like 'globalisation' or 'transnationalism' (sometimes involved in values like 'nationalism' or 'xenophobia'); and a more subjectivist dimension, which opposes systematic resistance to the liberalisation of customs, with the denunciation of the moral individualisation implied by the ideal model of modernity—the equality of women, the right to divorce, contraception and abortion, the autonomy of sexual experiences and gender identities, and so forth. The tightening of restrictive moral codes is often associated with the experience of conservative religious ideologies—one of the spearheads of 'reaction' since the nineteenth century—which constantly tension the boundary between the public sphere and a certain private dimension.

6 It would be interesting to examine this psychosocial process in light of George Foster's (1965) analysis of the mechanism he called 'the image of limited good'. It was the prevailing conception in a rural community in Central America that any economic improvement in the condition of any of its members necessarily implied harm to the remainder.

There are two bifurcations within this third theme that deserve special attention. The first is the extent of the reaction to any egalitarian policy of inclusion of minority (or subaltern) populations and to 'human rights' in general. Resistance here is fuelled by feelings of 'limited good' and 'injustice' on the part of those who are not 'benefited', associated with the theme of 'frustration'.

The second bifurcation is one that verifies how the reaction tends to manifest itself in the form of 'antagonism', marked by virulence and high aggression, using what has been called 'rhetoric of hate', in the pursuit of the 'elimination of the other', through the institution of 'scapegoats'. Some analyses highlight the climate of 'paranoia' that permeates these movements, due to the strong component of 'fear' and 'insecurity' detectable under the threats and insults (Alves da Silva 2023; Dunker & Kupermann 2023).

The fourth theme is the reaction against the power or hegemony of erudite, academic, scientific, and university knowledge. The mode of relating to the world characteristic of the literate layers of Western societies—with their blasé or highbrow attitude towards moral values—is pejoratively felt as an arrogant 'intellectualism' (Feltran 2020). This is yet another manifestation that can be attributed to 'resentment'.

According to Weber, a corollary of this theme is how this device of 'disenchantment' with thinking elites implies defensive conservative attitudes on the part of those who yearn for a palpable 'meaning' in life. Other authors further reflect on how the difference between the modern conception of 'representation' (distanced) and the mode of communication of 'transport' (entrenched in the body and lived experience) correspond to two antipodal aspects of the cultural configuration of the modern West (Latour 1990; Ingold 2007; Duarte 2016). Hence, the conservative reaction to 'intellectualism' perceived as alienation from lived experience.

A fifth theme, parallel to the fourth, establishes the existence of two conceptions of temporality in confrontation. In counterpoint to the progressive linearity of modern time (Koyré 1957), imbued with the ambition of permanently overcoming the present, resists a closed conception of time that is associable with traditional Christian cosmology. This time is contained within the limits of a pristine genesis, a permanent source of 'nostalgia', and of a terminal, redemptive future that is predicted by 'prophecy'. It is not merely an analogy of traditional Christian times, but an effective contemporary update of this form, cultivated by conservative Christian churches, particularly the Pentecostals, in which prophecy is current and through which the leading role of political entrepreneurs and charismatic leaders articulate local social bases with economic and political powers on broader, globally connected scales. The reaction to progressive time reinforces adherence to 'nostalgic' moral guidelines, inseparable from a confidence in the final destiny of 'good people'[7].

The sixth section of these considerations is perhaps better thought of as a dimension rather than a theme. It concerns the emotions associated with all these conservative movements and dispositions. References to several of them have appeared here before. Anger, envy, anguish and anxiety should be added to fear and resentment – in an ample articulation resulting from uncertainty, and feelings of injustice, frustration, humiliation and inferiority that affect the social segments most typically conveying the conservative reaction (Mouffe 2002)[8]. The emotion most frequently recognised in the literature in this configuration is that of 'resentment', from Weber to the most contemporary (Weber 1978 [1922]; Mouffe 2002; Gracino *et al*. 2021; Castro Rocha 2021; Cesarino 2022; Dunker & Kupermann 2023).

The focus on feelings of anger, envy, injustice, frustration, humiliation and inferiority is repeatedly brought to the fore, with the constant recognition of their serious attribute in the social reproduction of numerous social segments. As mentioned here, however, the intensity of these feelings is not directly proportional to

7 The theme of temporality is very important, but not univocal. Part of the contemporary revived evangelical worldview endorses progressivism under the figure of 'prosperity theology', for example—expression of an intra-worldly pragmatic disposition, of entrepreneurship, which possibly corresponds to the upwardly mobile or upwardly disposed segments of subordinate classes. However, this disposition coexists with a strong moral conservatism, though not necessarily ethical.

8 Following the typology of public relational orders proposed by L. Boltanski and L. Thévenot (1987), these are feelings characteristic of what they call the *cité domestique*, as opposed to those of the modern, enlightened *cité civique*.

the weight of the needs, but rather mediated by the circumstances of expectation involved—which allows us to understand that they also emerge among better established classes. For example, Norbert Elias and John Scotson suggest that:

> The higher they rise above the subsistence level, the more does even their income—their economic resources—serve as a means of satisfying human requirements other than that of stilling their most elementary animalic or material needs; the more keenly are groups in that situation liable to feel the social inferiority—the inferiority of power and status from which they suffer. (Elias and Scotson 1994: xxxii)

The focus on feelings of fear, anxiety and anguish, on the other hand, inspires specific psychosocial interpretations of the opposition between conservatism, especially moral conservatism, and progressivism. Christian Dunker and Daniel Kupermann analyse these feelings in the dichotomous key of unrest and appeasement: 'the greater the anguish experienced by society, the more conservative discourse tends to be appeasing for the individual'; or 'progressive discourse is less encouraging because it brings to light deep concerns, which add to the dominant anguish' (2023: 1). These authors consider that many of these manifestations can thus assume a 'paranoid' condition.

It is important to recognise that the emotional complex involved in these phenomena also involves feelings that could be considered affirmative or 'positive', in the emic sense, since they are felt in this way by the protagonists.

The militaristic ethos, of violent antagonism, repression, the elimination of otherness (Feltran 2020), certainly offers a basis of self-affirmation to those who experience it, however uncomfortable this fact may be for modern, progressive sensibilities. It is, whether we like it or not, 'empowerment', a feeling of dominance in the field of political struggle. Indeed, it characterises not only segments of the popular classes, in the strict sense, but the fringes of the most varied social layers that are socialised and organised within the scope of the Brazilian Armed Forces.

This feeling also presents itself as a domain of the informational field. Wagner Alves da Silva's (2023) digital interlocutors present themselves as ladies with a confident, aggressive knowledge, drawn from right-wing social networks, supported—as they argue—by a disposition of active knowledge, of searching for rational explanations for life's challenges. They challenge the researcher, seen as an unsuspecting university student, from a position of moral and intellectual superiority. From a scholarly point of view, João Cezar de Castro Rocha (2021: 41-2) calls this attitude 'erudite idiocy', the result of an excess of poorly processed information that creates increasingly elaborate conspiracy theories on social media. This renders the digital public space 'a succession of islands that reject the idea of an archipelago', a mass with 'seismic power' comparable to the urban masses of the beginning of the twentieth century.

The feelings involved in what has been called 'entrepreneurship' also form part of this configuration, with a strong basis in the dispositions of intra-worldly affirmation characteristic of much of the evangelical world—however, this will be discussed later, since it involves other structural conditions.

A seventh theme could be the willingness to react to all resentful threats through enlistment in niches of relationality and 'personalisation', organised as religious communities, criminal organisations, internet groups, and so forth (Mouffe 2002). The effect of group cohesion thus obtained is highlighted as an important element of the continuity of the reactive attitude, implying the resurgence of the aforementioned 'antagonism' in relation to opposing groups or situations.

These relational plots in a state of structural 'antagonism' are nourished by affective-cognitive strategies considered characteristic of the conservative reaction: denialism, conspiracism, mental operation through a patchwork of rumours, denunciation of the 'system', the repetition of 'empty signifiers'. The reflexive reaction to 'intellectualism' leads to a disposition of 'erudite idiocy', seen as immune to doubt and dialogue outside the organised niches.

Elias and Scotson describe this relational effect as:

> the degree of group cohesion, the collective identification, the commonalty of norms, which are apt to induce the gratifying euphoria that goes with the consciousness of belonging to a group of higher value and with the complementary contempt for other groups. (Elias & Scotson 1994: xviii)

Given due consideration, the intensity of the fraternal bond corresponds to that of the bond between the group itself and its populist leader, following the suggestion that Letícia Cesarino added to Ernesto Laclau's observations on the equivalence between leader and people and on the construction of antagonisms outwards: an 'inverse mimesis' occurs when 'the enemy appears as an inverted mirror of the leader-people identity' (Cesarino 2022: 149).

Structural hypotheses

We now address what we call 'structural hypotheses', given their greater degree of systematicity in relation to the plethora of signs, symptoms and analytical perceptions that have accumulated in our material.

The first section is that of socio-morphological hypotheses, that is, relating to the location of the conveyors of the conservative reaction in the usual class typologies. As stated, we are concerned here with the 'popular' segments that adopt conservative ideologies and adapt them to their survival devices. There is much insistence in the literature on locating these movements in segments ranging from the 'middle class' in general to the 'proletarian layers' or the 'lumpenproletariat', passing through the 'lower middle classes' or 'petty bourgeoisie' (more refined characterisations exist, such as those of the 'lower upper middle class'—cf. Nunes 2022—or the 'lumpen-bourgeoisie'). These morphological characterisations were examined in Marx and Weber, with great emphasis—and they return repeatedly. There, as here, morphological classifications do not dispense with a dynamic, relational understanding of types, like when Weber discusses the role of the 'threats of proletarianisation'.

A novelty in contemporary analyses is the observation of the importance of provisions that could be described as 'affirmative' in these underprivileged segments. Above all, this concerns the dissemination of the ideology of autonomous work or 'entrepreneurship', in which the personal effort of self-affirmation or social ascension (the strivers in American sociology) justifies a consistent defence of the status quo, resistant to egalitarian interventions by the state or compensation policies. This attitude is correlated with that which motivates most priestly careers in the popular evangelical world (and the preaching of 'prosperity theology') and, for various reasons, cannot be dissociated from the careers of criminal leaders—both in gangs and para-police militias. In all three cases, there is a kind of 'empowerment' or assumption of a 'place of speech' inseparable from the feeling of belonging or communion with an ethos group. The same spirit of aggressiveness and antagonism reigns there, a clear mirroring between the economic struggle and the political struggle[9].

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx (2009) characterises the conservative movements that lead to the authoritarian coup d'état as coming from the 'refuse of bourgeois society' (11), the 'people's unorganic masses' (22), the 'unripe masses' (45), of the 'middle class, that is to say, a Transition Class' (35), of the slum-proletariat (*Lumpenproletariat* in the German original), 'the high as well as the low' (48). This combines the classificatory criteria of disorganisation (including those of immature and transitional character) and marginality[10].

9 Gabriel Feltran (2020) presents and discusses a highly exemplary Brazilian ethnographic case of what he calls 'entrepreneurial monetarism'.

10 The category of the lumpenproletariat reappears with emphasis in Laclau (2005: 180), but it is encompassed at a more macro level of interpretations of late capitalism and neoliberalism (including entrepreneurship).

The lumpenproletariat is also invoked by Weber (1978), as an alternative to 'the masses', 'petty bourgeoisie and proletarian strata' or 'negatively privileged strata'. The dimension of 'instability' appears there, but the main criterion is the involvement in all cases of 'a reaction against the development of modern rationalism' (471)[11].

The second section is the hypothesis that we have called 'contrastive reaction' or 'dialectical agonism'[12], summarising sparse indications from some literature (Duarte 2009; Gregori, in press). This is an analytical configuration influenced by the concept of schismogenesis elaborated by Gregory Bateson (1936), and which has been characterised through expressions like backlash or 'escalation'. It consists of the tendency presented by certain types of social relations, in which one of the elements of a dyad (personal or collective) seeks to reinforce its distinctive characteristics from that of the opposing element, thus, tending to establish an ever-increasing differentiation, until it is interrupted or contradicted by some other force or social situation. This analytical scheme could account for the more formal properties of 'antagonism' or cognitive dissonance between those who convey liberal ideology and those who fly the flag of conservatism—as has been verified in Western modernity and, somewhat surprisingly, in the entire contemporary world.

Besides the socio-morphological hypotheses, there are hypotheses that we call 'psychosocial'. The first is the hypothesis of frustration with political representation in situations of hegemony of a governing party system (Mouffe 2002). The permanence of the same democratic governmental configuration for long periods could produce an association of concerns and frustrations that always inevitably exist with the form of government itself (and not solely with the party), allowing a permeation of relatively conjunctural authoritarian dispositions.

A very peculiar hypothesis was raised by Thomas Cortado (2023), concerning the persistence of an anti-slavery cultural background among the popular classes in Brazil—which had previously been proposed by Otávio Velho (1987). This trait enables an association of possible links between progressivism and some form of 'communism' or 'socialism' (as right-wing populist propaganda often conveys) with a threat to freedom. In the author's terms: 'the persistence of the Bolsonarist phenomenon is also due to the realisation of a certain democratic imaginary, deeply rooted in Brazilian history' (Cortado 2023).

The last of these hypotheses—of enormous importance—is the one that involves the current circumstances of social communication, with the proliferation of mass, cybernetic, digital media. The almost universal availability of the internet, with the massive production of non-face-to-face 'social networks', allows much faster and more comprehensive flows than any other previous vehicle, meaning that the logic of algorithms, fake news, and now—though still incipiently—AI (artificial intelligence) applied to communication, radically interferes with forms of public influence (in particular, cf. Engesser *et al*. 2017; Cesarino 2020, 2022).

This psychosocial hypothesis presupposes the radical institutional changes that have occurred in the structure of mass communication in recent decades, particularly with regard to the 'participatory internet' and so-called 'platformisation'. None of the contemporary analyses fails to include this dimension of contemporary social relations as crucial to understanding the dynamics of our object. An important researcher on the subject speaks of 'digital populism' and a 'king's digital body' (Cesarino 2019, 2022), as signs of the crucial intersection between the two phenomena. This includes almost all the characteristics we discussed above, maximised by the articulation, flexibility, universality, capillarity and velocity of these 'networks', capable of producing 'mass' effects in non-face-to-face contexts. Moreover, one of its characteristics is that it can produce circulation segmentations (through logarithms and other technical resources) that favour the encystment of values and

11 'The lowest and the most economically unstable strata of the proletariat, for whom rational conceptions are the least congenial, and also the proletaroid or permanently impoverished petty-bourgeois groups who are in constant danger of sinking into the proletarian class, are nevertheless readily susceptible to being influenced by religious missionary enterprise. But this religious propaganda has in such cases a distinctively magical form or, where real magic has been eliminated, it has certain characteristics which are substitutes for the magical-orgiastic supervention of grace. Examples of these are the soteriological orgies of the Methodist type, such as are engaged in by the Salvation Army' (Weber 1978: 486).

12 The category 'agonism', in contrast to 'antagonism', is examined more narrowly in the work of Chantal Mouffe: 'what is important is that conflict does not take the form of an "antagonism" (struggle between enemies) but the form of an "agonism" (struggle between adversaries)' (Mouffe 2013: 7).

attitude systems. Here we find another thread of 'empowerment': the affirmative feeling of political agency that people from the popular classes experience thanks to new forms of communication, with the feeling of being in direct contact with the leader with whom they identify (the 'disintermediation' to which Cesarino refers) and actually doing politics, a privilege seen as previously restricted to literate segments.

Many of the interpretations of the phenomenon of right-wing populism rest on the recognition of the strategic nature of new digital mass communications, with palpable implications for the functioning of the political order. In Brazil, suffice to mention Castro Rocha's timely quote from a literal phrase by right-wing influencer Olavo de Carvalho: 'The secret was the careful planning of the flow of information, calculated to paralyse consciousness through contradictory stimulation' (2021: 90). In the US, Levitsky and Ziblatt cite how one of the factors that made the election of President Donald Trump feasible included 'the explosion of alternative media, particularly cable news and social media' (2018: 56).

There is an invariably individualistic bias in approaches to the issue of right-wing populism, which tends to present any characteristic that does not enter into the matrix of intelligibility of the legal and psychological dimensions of the modern individual as error, excess or residue. Hence the importance of psychosocial hypotheses to explain the phenomenon through its emotional dimensions. In line with Cortado, when drawing attention to 'progressive prejudice', Vladimir Safatle (2023) warns that the use of 'psychological' categories to explain conservative behaviours, particularly in relation to 'resentment',

> serve more to hide the impotence of progressive policies than to analyse the real motives that lead some workers and precarious groups to convert to the far right. Moreover, such explanations end up producing a moralisation of social conflicts that personalises focuses of action, rather than getting to their objective structural causes. At most, they serve to be applied to ourselves, in a continuous exercise of self-suspicion and self-inspection. Or to strengthen a feeling of moral and intellectual superiority that only helps to mask our real political impotence. (Safatle 2023:6)

The phenomenon called 'resistance' by psychoanalysis can be invoked here. In this case, the resistance to understanding the other on their terms, being able to create empathy and implementing the various methodologies of ethnographic monitoring developed since the 'shift' towards pain, emotions, and suffering that anthropology has adopted since the 1980s—when an anthropology of the subject (universalist) emerged that critically opposes the anthropology of the person (which, among other things, aims to account for native notions of good and justice; cf. Robbins 2013). Resistance had already been analysed by Georges Devereux, Vincent Crapanzano and Antonius Robben, when they talk about certain countertransference phenomena that the anthropologist does not control, which is why they end up working only with those who they identify with. We argue that the angle of the anthropology of urban religion (Birman 2012, 2019; Birman & Machado 2012; Bonfim 2016; Esperança 2022) is that which best accounts for this popular, populist individual—without naming them as such, with the exception of Bonfim (2020).

Final observations

This investigation resulted from perplexity with regard to the fate of the so-called 'modern' public order in the face of the growing presence and protagonism of right-wing populism in the contemporary world.

In addition to the ruinous nature of the economic and socio-political circumstances currently faced by human societies, in the most varied cultural contexts and political regimes, it is considered indispensable to understand how the condition of person is articulated, the indispensable means of any living experience, mobilisation and concerted action. To achieve this, we reviewed part of the extensive literature available and, little by little, ended up returning to the classic structural tension between 'freedom' (liberalism) and 'equality' (democracy) in the dynamics of societies inspired by the ideology of individualism (Dumont,

1986a). Right-wing populism touts the virtues of economic and political 'freedom'—in its current alliances with neoliberalism—at the same time as it remonstrates against all moral liberality. The free-contracting individual is a person who fears the modernisation of customs as a perverse imposition of elites. They also oppose the progressive, egalitarian policies of the left, since they experience them as a restriction on their status as a free contractor. Policies of social compensation or protection of underprivileged populations and the environment are particularly abhorrent—resented at times as injustice, at times as undue constriction.

We also reviewed how this configuration of person has manifested since the mid-nineteenth century, in the midst of the broad transformations brought about by liberalism, capitalism and romanticism—that is, by quantitative and qualitative individualism (*sensu* Simmel 1950 [1917]). These transformations occurred—and continue to occur—in very different rhythms and forms of dissemination, producing a generalised ideological cacophony. Even in societies most structured according to the ideology of individualism, different ways of being a person began to coexist, no longer necessarily restricted to assigned statuses, but—which could, in principle, be acquired—as objects of confrontation, transformation and conflict.

As a universal conscience currently dictates, we reiterate the extreme deepening of these contradictions in the context of the digital revolution, which gives rise to forms and conditions of circulation of information and social mediations completely different from those that had characterised modernity up to the end of the twentieth century, influencing the construction of the person beyond the traditional circuits of family, religion and formal education.

All political ideologies are nourished by such conditions, including right-wing populism. Its appeal finds an echo in mentalities where the standard of the modern 'individual' does not thrive in its ideal-typical form. This does not only concern the popular classes—particularly in the pockets that our authors sought to define. They are also found among the elites, possibly for motives and in different forms than the lumpenproletariat or the small, rising middle classes. Perhaps it is better to say that these mentalities tend to be the majority—the ideal modern model circulating solely among the highly literate segments of the middle classes. And even there with noticeable exceptions!

The anthropological disposition to disclose the multiple alterities that surround the progressive modern core does not simply aim to illustrate the enlightened: it also aims to enable the imaginary of ideological producers to conceive alternatives to this impasse. Is it possible to project a future in which liberal, progressive universalism remains hegemonic but comes to embrace the many lines of difference that now threaten it? Contemporary identity movements were certainly proposed and cultivated with a benevolent intention of this kind. Unfortunately, they have not worked for this purpose: the differences that are encysted tend to violate the universalist ideal without enriching it.

One of the most stimulating theories towards a possible articulation between universalism and differences is that formulated by Chantal Mouffe in a series of works on what she calls ineradicable political 'agonism'. She advocates for the construction of a more complex representation of the modern political order: 'it is high time for left-wing intellectuals to adopt a pluralist approach and to reject the type of universalism that postulates the rational and moral superiority of Western modernity' (Mouffe 2013: xv; also cf. 2002).

As previously mentioned, Dumont's theory of hierarchy is another analytical possibility for dealing with the challenge of the permanence of different forms of person (like those that nourish right-wing populism) alongside the universalist, 'individualist' ideal. Dumont himself considered that anthropology had a similar disposition to the hierarchical principle: that of 'uniting through differences' (Dumont 1986a: 233). Perhaps this was the appropriate motto to construct a new political horizon.

Given these conditions, for now, we cannot help but close the text with a renewed awareness of the magnitude of the enigma that lies before us, with the underlined combination of gravity and perplexity that

imposes the question concerning the general destiny of Western culture: a 'malaise of civilisation' that like a novel sinister spectre, haunts more than ever the fate of our 'civilising process'.

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