

Broadening the horizons of anthropological understanding:
ethnographies with ‘uncomfortable otherness’

The battle of the Zé Gotinhas: The schismogenesis of images and political audiences on Brazilian social media

*Kelly Cristiane da Silva*¹

*Fábio de Oliveira Martins*¹

¹ Universidade de Brasília, Departamento de Antropologia, Brasília, DF, Brasil.

Abstract:

Centring on a dispute between different versions of an icon of public health and immunization policies in Brazil, we explore the analytic potential of the rival images and their embedding in a dynamic structure of long-term schismogenesis fed by former president Jair Bolsonaro, his political allies and publics. The conflict over different versions of Zé Gotinha published at the beginning of Covid-19 vaccination – one produced by the illustrator and designer-activist Cristiano Siqueira, another commissioned by Eduardo Bolsonaro, a federal deputy and a son of the former president—inserted in the context of a semiological guerrilla war, allows us to examine the different images as, simultaneously, part of a confrontation that begins with the images and ends in the structural forces perpetuating the schismogenesis between allies of the former president and his adversaries. Over the course of the text, we identify symbolic offensives and retreats in accordance with the political situation of the moment.

Keywords: Jair Bolsonaro; Bolsonarism; Activist design; Zé Gotinha; Covid-19; Schismogenesis.

La Batalla de los Zé Gotinhas: La cismogénesis de las imágenes y audiencias políticas en las redes sociales brasileñas

Resumen:

Centrándonos en una disputa entre diferentes versiones de un ícono de las políticas de salud pública e inmunización en Brasil, exploramos el potencial analítico de imágenes antagónicas y su integración en una estructura dinámica de cismogénesis a largo plazo, alimentada por el ex presidente Jair Bolsonaro, sus aliados políticos y públicos. El conflicto por las diferentes versiones de Zé Gotinha publicadas al inicio de la vacunación contra el Covid-19 (una realizada por el ilustrador y diseñador-activista Cristiano Siqueira, otra encargada por Eduardo Bolsonaro, Diputado Federal e hijo del ex presidente), ambas en un contexto de guerra de guerrillas semiológica, nos permite examinar las diferentes imágenes como, simultáneamente, parte de una confrontación que comienza con las imágenes y termina en las fuerzas estructurales que perpetúan la cismogénesis entre aliados del ex presidente y sus adversarios. A lo largo del texto, identificamos ofensivas y retrocesos simbólicos de acuerdo con la situación política del momento.

Palabras clave: Jair Bolsonaro; Bolsonarismo; Diseño activista; Zé Gotinha; Covid-19; Cismogénesis.

The battle of the Zé Gotinhas: The schismogenesis of images and political audiences on Brazilian social media

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What happens when supposedly antagonistic variations of an icon (Peirce 2005) confront each other in a context of permanent political clashes between different publics in the social media environment? What implications did the Covid-19 pandemic have for the semiotic dispute surrounding the use of a public icon in Brazil, governed at the time by Jair Messias Bolsonaro? Can a response materialized in an image be shown to be a recognizably effective act?¹

In the following pages we explore the schismogenic potential of images in a confrontation between two versions of Zé Gotinha (Droplet Joe), also understood here as images embedded in a communicational structure that potentializes the clash between publics and citizens through social networks in the context of the start of the Covid-19 vaccination campaign in Brazil in 2021. This confrontation involved the dissemination of an image produced by the illustrator and member of the Design Ativista movement, Cristiano Siqueira—also known as Cris Vector—and another image posted on social media by the federal deputy for São Paulo, Eduardo Bolsonaro—the son of former president Jair Bolsonaro and one of his informal spokespeople.

Although academic research and publications on design activism—as a practice or *praxis*—and on *Design Ativista*—as an organised movement—have proliferated in recent years (Batista 2023; De Albuquerque 2018; Junior de Moura & Guimarães 2020; Queiroz & Villas-Boas 2020; Junior, Moura & Henriques 2021), we have yet to see a significant volume of studies on the ways in which images produced by activist designers are reproduced and circulated (Martins 2022), or image-based research on the clashes between different political fields in contemporary Brazil. The latter has previously been the subject of investigations that have concentrated principally on the far right on social media and from a discursive viewpoint (Solano & Rocha 2019; Cesarino 2022), paying little attention to imagery. While these studies provide a source of inspiration, here we adopt a different approach that allows us to expand the analysis to new frontiers.

Based on the facts described below, we argue that the battle of Zé Gotinhas reproduced and fed back into the political schismogenesis prevalent in contemporary Brazil, at the same time as it worked to broaden publics, insofar as it promoted a kind of partial encompassment of the opposite, given the gravity of the situation involved—the Covid-19 pandemic. At first glance, this episode reactivated the schismogenic cycle for the antistructural publics to which it was targeted, but it also radiated ambiguous messages of retreat for both fronts on which the battle took place.

The article is organised into three sections. In the first, we explore the concept of schismogenesis in Bateson (2008) and Cesarino (2022), its importance for a better understanding of the communicational ecosystem (Nunes & Traumann 2023) managed by Bolsonaro and his sons and their favouring of the architecture of social networks. Next, we discuss the different versions of Zé Gotinha, exploring the figure's expanded range of significations—through the addition of unpredictable elements—and its insertion in a battle of meanings. Finally, we discuss the limits of the communicational effectiveness of Cris Vector's illustration and how Eduardo

¹ We use the terms icon, index and symbol in the senses proposed by Peirce (2005). An icon is a sign whose signifying potential derives from a relation of similarity with the thing represented. Symbols are signs whose representative capacity derives from a relation established with the represented thing by force of convention. Finally, indices extract their denotative potential from being taken as part of the represented phenomenon.

Bolsonaro's indirect response can simultaneously demonstrate the ambiguity of the Bolsonarist messages, attest to a disturbance in its communicational ecosystem and represent a form of regaining control of the crisis, experienced until then by the federal government through a strategic retreat—tactically presented as a controlled mitigation of the schismogenic process.

Schismogenesis and the digital world

Describing phenomena observed between 1929 and 1935 when he was living among the Iatmul and other Sepik peoples in New Guinea, Bateson (1936) proposes the term schismogenesis for 'a process of differentiation in the norms of individual behaviour resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals' (1936: 175), part of his then embryonic social psychology. Two types of schismogenesis can be discerned, which the author calls complementary and symmetrical. The first type refers to the behaviours of two individuals—'A' and 'B'—exercised in different ways, such that the behaviour of the former affects the actions of the latter, accentuating B's behaviour while also simultaneously reinforcing characteristics of A's own behaviour. This cycle of actions can be altered over time. The second type, which can also be used to comprehend progressive changes, implies that individuals or groups respond to the behaviours of other individuals or groups in symmetrical fashion, amplifying these behaviours over time. Seeking to explain the difference between complementary and symmetrical schismogenesis, the author emphasizes the difference in meaning between schism – when groups sharing the same doctrine distinguish themselves politically—and heresy—when one group possesses 'doctrines antagonistic to those of the parent group' (Bateson 1936: 177, note 1).

The formulation of schismogenesis as two distinct types does not mean they are set in concrete: reiterating the analytic range of these categories, Bateson points out that the theory of schismogenesis can help us comprehend or explain phenomena like the 'intimate relations between pairs of individuals' or the 'progressive maladjustment between neurotic and prepsychotic individuals' (1936: 178 and 179) in cultural contacts and in politics, or even in *potlatch*. There are mutual influences between symmetrical and complementary schismogenesis, such that one type can possess elements of the other, especially when the number of pairs of relations increases. Some conditions exist for these cycles of mutual and progressively augmented oppositions, among them the maintenance of individuals in a state of holding together, 'by some form of common interest, mutual dependence, or by their social status' (1936: 182-183), or when there is a disparity between these individuals—as in the case of the dissociation between assertive and submissive in the Iatmul case.

To avoid conceiving schismogenesis as a progressive schism *ad infinitum*, Bateson recognised forms of controlling the process. A readjustment in schismogenic relations occurs when two pairs of relations are brought into contact; the change in the terms of a rivalry can lead to an easing of tensions (1936: 194). This will prove important below insofar as mitigation of the conflict may be in the interest of both groups, for distinct reasons and with different objectives.

In politics, Bateson considers the rivalry between nations to be a variant of symmetrical schismogenesis, while the class war is interpreted as a manifestation of complementary schismogenesis. Not even the relations between an authoritarian government and those ruled escape his attention in the politics of schismogenesis. Although he considers this vast scope of possibilities for observing politics a difficult field to study, its analytic potential is transparent:

...it might conceivably be worth while to observe to what extent in their policies politicians are reacting to the reactions of their opponents, and to what extent they are paying attention to the conditions which they are supposedly trying to adjust. It may be that when the processes of schismogenesis have been studied in other and simpler fields, the conclusions from this study may prove applicable in politics. (Bateson 1936: 186-187).

Bateson does not develop the theme further. An exploration of schismogenesis and its repercussions in the dimension of institutional politics, between rulers and ruled, or even between nations, is limited to the few pages of the section ‘Schismogenesis in Other Contexts.’ Although Bateson recognises that the very idea of symmetrical schismogenesis came to him from a dialogue on European politics (1936: 266), there are no more coordinates to observe in *Naven* for investigations in this field, seen at the time of the book’s population as just one potential topic.

In Cesarino (2022), schismogenesis acquires not only amplitude but also a scalar range and a certain updating for the challenges posed by this universe. Applying the concept of antistructural publics² (ibid: 49) to the Brazilian context and the relationship between the former president Jair Bolsonaro and his voters, evangelists³ and less present spectators, we encounter a system ‘in crisis or far from equilibrium (...) [in which] the state of liminality is prolonged’ (Idem 2022: 67). This involves a kind of slow-drip testing of limits that tends towards the erosion of liberal democracy and the existing political system. For his opponents, this presents itself as a threat, while for his allies it manifests as a kind of interrupted jouissance. In them, we can see a continual actioning of extremes (ibid: 76),⁴ generating what the author calls a ‘double twist of the inverse mimesis type’ (ibid: 76), at the same time as there occurs an ‘encompassment of the opposite’ (ibid: 81, 83). The flagrant antagonism between antistructural publics and the dominant public is such that what might appear merely a manifestation of left-wing political opposition acceptable in other contexts becomes seen by the members of this Bolsonarist communicational ecosystem as an existential threat (ibid: 139).

The distancing from other groups, by a group guided by values like the heterosexual nuclear family and arming the civilian population (ibid: 90), is also reinforced by metacommunication (ibid: 119). Represented by the Greek letter μ , metacommunication refers to the questions asked by an agent concerning which relations are being constructed in a given context, such as, for example, a friend-enemy relationship.

The construction of friend-enemy relations by the former president concerning his public was not limited to the electoral period in 2018—the year when Bolsonaro beat the PT (Workers’ Party) candidate Fernando Haddad with 57.8 million votes. Rather, it was part of a new sense of what it means to govern, namely the sustaining of a process of continuous schismogenesis (ibid: 181) in which the constant is a ‘dynamic of advances and retreats that maintain schismogenesis as the encompassing pole’ (ibid: 185). This, in the words of Nunes and Traumann, signifies that ‘with Bolsonaro, governing means confronting’ (2023: 69).

This confrontational style of government was not exercised in the abstract but was supported by a communications ecosystem that spanned from daily briefings in front of the Alvorada Presidential Palace in Brasilia to equally daily posts on instant message and social media platforms like Twitter/X (2023: 47). Presenting himself as the first digital president in Brazilian history (ibid), Bolsonaro’s communications strategy eliminated the need for intermediation by the traditional media, placing him in direct contact with his voter base, reinforcing a kind of reign of the communicator in politics (ibid: 39). Consequently, Bolsonarist communications do not take the form of a single uniformly distributed message: rather, they include his closest

2 Based on the combination of the categories of counter public and refracted public (Cesarino 2022b) and inspired by the idea of antistructure in Victor Turner’s work, antistructural publics (ibid: 167) comprise those groups that orbit Bolsonarism through its communicational structure and act in opposition to the dominant publics and political opponents. Instead of acting to maintain the social order, however they test the limits of liberal democracy and seek to destabilize political institutions (ibid: 165).

3 A term native to Marketing Digital designating users who become advocates for a brand and advertise its products either for free or for payment.

4 An example of this mobilization of extremes can be identified precisely in the public statements of former president Jair Bolsonaro concerning the origin, efficacy and alternatives to Covid-19 vaccination. These declarations seem to have been deliberately made to mobilize groups who see themselves as politically antagonistic. Thus, by asserting that the effectiveness of a Chinese vaccine was unproven, the antagonistic publics were mobilized to praise the former president’s pronouncement, on one side, and accuse of him of being a vaccine denialist or anti-vaxxer, on the other. This ‘digital first’ movement anticipates that both groups will take to the social networks, generating an impact for the president’s declaration, irrespective of their positioning, so that the message will reach even more people for distinct reasons.

supporters and ‘all those who are part of his audience—influencers, algorithms and regular users’ (Cesarino 2022: 180), stimulating a kind of *micro-segmentation*—as we shall see below.

When we talk about the interface between politics and communication—as we have developed over the preceding pages, informed by the idea of schismogenesis—we are speaking both about the technological architecture of social networks and about new behaviours of citizens as activists and voters. This integration is not fortuitous: political positionings are embedded in the data structure, metadata (data about data), algorithms and graphic user interfaces of social networks (Cesarino 2022; O’Neil 2020). This deep structure favours the scenario of prolonged schismogenesis insofar as it does not take into consideration the positive or negative quality of comments and reactions, only their overall number.

Social networks also modify the forms of exercising citizenship and political rights (Beiguelman 2021; Castells 2017, 2018; Manin 2013; Martins 2019; Neves 2016). These networks have enabled the emergence of new fields of dispute, the integration of the image of the electorate into the dispute and the active participation of the public as an agent in the construction of public opinion (Martins 2019: 33) and ultimately as a transformer of the very ‘meaning of politics’ (Cesarino 2022: 201).

The practical effects of a logic of prolonged schismogenesis – integrated into the digital first communicational ecosystem—and the expected reaction of digital activists from progressive, leftist and even moderate fields, collaborated in transforming the public sphere (ibid: 91). It is in this environment of digitally-mediated symbolic confrontations that two versions of the same iconic figure emerged, historically associated with public health policies in Brazil: the Zé Gotinha drawn by Cristiano Siqueira and the Zé Gotinha published by Eduardo Bolsonaro.

The battle of the ‘Zé Gotinhas’ in a semiotic guerrilla war

Fig. 1: Post by Cristiano Siqueira, ‘Cris Vector,’ published on Twitter, on a re-reading of the Zé Gotinha character published by federal deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro.



Source: Twitter/X account of Cristiano, @crisvector. See <https://twitter.com/crisvector/status/1370467998306349057>. Accessed 10 February 2024.

At 5:13 pm on March 12, 2021, the designer and illustrator Cristiano Siqueira—also known as ‘Cris Vector’—published two illustrations on his Twitter/X social media account featuring the same motif: the figure Zé Gotinha (Droplet Joe) combined with Covid-19 vaccination.⁵ The post also included a caption, *E a esquerda segue pautando a direita*, ‘And the left continues to set the agenda for the right,’ accompanying the two image files. On the left, a version of the mascot (A) with a muscular body and a determined facial expression, displaying the symbol of the Unified Health System (SUS) like a tattoo and holding a large syringe like an assault rifle with the logo of the Butantã Institute—the main Brazilian producer of vaccines based on Chinese supplies and at that time associated by the Bolsonaroists with the then governor of São Paulo, João Doria Jr. (PSDB)—emblazoned on the syringe tube. On the right, a screenshot of a post on the same social network, made by the federal deputy for São Paulo Eduardo Bolsonaro (PL), containing an illustration of the same character (B) with a less protruding scope, a smiling expression, wearing the Brazilian flag like a cape and holding a syringe that merges with the elements of an assault rifle.⁶ This is also accompanied by a caption: ‘Our weapon now is the vaccine’ (Figure 1).

The first image was published on January 7, 2021, by Cristiano himself on his social networks,⁷ while the second was published by the federal deputy over two months later, on March 12, two days after a declaration from the then pre-candidate for a third presidential mandate, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, on the absence of Zé Gotinha in the Covid-19 immunization campaign. Made after the now president had irately alleged that ‘Bolsonaro sacked [Zé Gotinha] because he thought he was a PT supporter,’⁸ Eduardo Bolsonaro’s post offers evidence of a reaction to the declarations of the PT leader and attest to their effectiveness.

Appearing together in Cristiano’s post, both illustrations attribute new meanings to Zé Gotinha, expanding the semiotics (Silva & Ferreira 2016) of the figure’s iconography, adding signs and evoking different values, while at the same time enabling a reinterpretation of what an immunization campaign might be. Roughly speaking, these two versions of the character reveal one approach that aims to defend scientific knowledge and democratize access to epidemiological treatments, and another approach that presents the Brazilian flag as a superhero cape and promotes a pro-gun agenda—suggesting an attack on the virus and, simultaneously, on political adversaries, adhering to the friend-enemy logic of Bolsonaroist metacommunication.

The origin of the tensions expressed in these images, as well as the implications of the pandemic for Cristiano’s production of images and for the communications strategy of deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro’s mandate, are not entirely self-explanatory. The concentrated nature of the signs present here requires the mobilization of other elements for an adequate analysis of the schismogenic dynamics inherent to movements involving the containment and expansion of social fissions.

Cris Vector, as he is known professionally and on social networks, is a designer and illustrator based in São Paulo. With 117,000 followers on Instagram and 83,000 on Twitter/X, Cristiano adopted a pseudonym that evokes the digital techniques he uses in his illustrations, namely those relating to vectorization.⁹ His work is internationally recognized, having worked on projects for corporations like Nike, Deezer, ESPN, Gillette and Pepsico.¹⁰ Since 2018, at least, he has posted images on his social networks with illustrations on political topics, ranging from the celebration of left-wing politicians like Fernando Haddad, Manuela D’Ávila and Marielle

5 A disease caused by the SARS-Cov-2 virus and its mutational variants. From March 11, 2020, the disease reached the level of a global pandemic, as declared by the World Health Organisation. See ‘OMS Declara Pandemia de Coronavírus.’ G1, March 11, 2020. Available at: <https://g1.globo.com/bemestar/coronavirus/noticia/2020/03/11/oms-declara-pandemia-de-coronavirus.ghtml>. Accessed 10 February 2024.

6 Like the handle, magazine, grip, retainer and butt similar to those of the M4A1 carbine model or the M16 rifle.

7 See <https://twitter.com/crisvector/status/1347266309705392137/photo/1>. Accessed 10 February 2024.

8 See *Estado de Minas*. “Eduardo Bolsonaro posta ‘Zé Gotinha’ apontando seringa como fuzil.” 12 March 2021. Available at https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2021/03/12/interna_politica,1246154/eduardo-bolsonaro-posta-ze-gotinha-apontando-seringa-como-fuzil.shtml. Accessed 10 February 2024.

9 Vectorization involves a set of digital industrial design techniques that produce, instead of pixels, forms that are read by editing software as mathematical formulas that can be reduced or enlarged without loss of definition.

10 See Cristiano Siqueira, “About.” Available at <https://crisvector.myportfolio.com/about>. Accessed February 10, 2024.

Franco¹¹—a Rio de Janeiro councilwoman murdered in March 2018—to illustrations strongly critical of the Jair Bolsonaro government and its supporters.

Also in 2018, Cristiano joined a social movement with a unique profile, created and stabilized as a result of the electoral period, known as Design Ativista (Martins 2022). As Manuel De Landa pointed out—in his proposal for a philosophy of society—a social movement, which is structured in a network and possesses elements of self-organization, can be recognized as a hybrid of interpersonalities and institutionalities (Castells 2017; De Landa 2006). Reflecting the hybrid dimension of the designer movement's activities, the illustrator sometimes works on projects in partnership with organizations like the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB) and sometimes on individual projects—mobilizing his own network of followers on the social media platforms on which he has accounts. His activity as a political militant, communicator and citizen designer (Heller & Vienne 2018) often involves rapid public manifestations in support or repudiation of a political idea, declaration or event, generally marked by a feeling of ally-adversary opposition that may also incorporate practices for expanding the meanings of symbolic coordinates already known to his public.

In their research on East Timorese fabrics called *tais*, Silva and Ferreira (2016), inspired by the concept of resonance in physics, propose the idea of an *increase in semiotic amplitude* to describe the expansion of meanings in signs when they enter into contact with other signs and expressive mediators. These processes make new denotations of signs possible (ibid: 57). For the purposes of this article, considering the increase in semiotic amplitude in the social media posting of versions of the Zé Gotinha figure signifies that both the Cris Vector version and the version circulated by Eduardo Bolsonaro added elements to a widely-known icon, allowing them to access new publics by also conveying new meanings.

At this point, however, the reader may ask: what are the effects produced by the mobilization of images of Zé Gotinha in an already fissioned field? To answer this question, we must return to the character's creation.

Created in 1986 by the artist Darlan Rosa, in partnership with the Brazilian Ministry of Health and the United Nation's Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the character 'Zé Gotinha' was initially conceived with the main objective of popularizing child vaccination against polio.¹² Although the iconic design dates from 1986, the figure was only named in 1988 after a national competition was held in which any citizen could suggest a moniker for what was then an anonymous character.¹³

The aesthetic choice of the figure's name and visual features were part of a strategic change in the institutional communication policy of the Ministry of Health under the José Sarney government (1985-1990). The explicit objective was to break down the population's resistance to vaccination and evaluate an alternative to the preceding campaigns, whose messaging had been designed more to scare people using the threat of morbid disease and death. Following the high level of public uptake, Zé Gotinha became the official icon of the National Immunization Program.

Thirty-three years later, the figure was appropriated by both Cristiano Siqueira and Eduardo Bolsonaro—by the unknown artist responsible for the latter's illustration—and transformed into support for a semiotic and political battle that went far beyond the communicational objectives for which it was originally created. Zé Gotinha thus underwent a semiotic amplification (Silva & Ferreira 2016) insofar as the tension over the meanings contained in the two versions constituted, amid a prolonged schismogenesis, a skirmish in a semiological guerrilla

11 In parallel to the consolidation of right-wing social movements and political parties in Brazil, which led, among other things, to the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, there was a regrouping of left-wing political forces. Three left-wing leaders mentioned in this article emerged as symbols of resistance and opposition: Marielle Franco, a Rio de Janeiro councilwoman for the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL), murdered in March 2018; Manuela D'Ávila, a former federal deputy and then state deputy of Rio Grande do Sul for the Communist Party of Brazil (PC do B), who also ran as vice-presidential candidate alongside Fernando Haddad, Lula's former education minister, former mayor of São Paulo-SP for the Workers' Party (PT) and the presidential candidate nominated by Lula. Also a symbol of the opposition to the Bolsonaro government, Fernando Haddad is now currently finance minister in Luís Inácio Lula da Silva's third term as president.

12 A vaccination given orally, also known as *gotinhas* or 'droplets,' hence the name of the character.

13 See "Casa do Zé Gotinha," Fiocruz. Available at <https://www.bio.fiocruz.br/index.php/br/comunicacao/casa-ze-gotinha>. Accessed 10 February 2024.

war (Eco 1973). The effectiveness of Cristiano's action and the insertion of the federal deputy's action-response within the communicational ecosystem of Bolsonaroism will be the theme of the concluding section of this article.

The conservative Zé Gotinha in the long-term schismogenesis

Following the critical event of the Covid-19 pandemic, Cris Vector began to respond to episodes from everyday Brazilian political life touching on the virus in ways similar¹⁴ to those he had already been using since 2018. His response showing two main tendencies: on one hand, praise for professionals in the field of infectiology and nursing, an intransigent defence of the public health system (SUS) and the objective demand for vaccines; on the other, criticism of the actions and declarations of the former president of the republic concerning the deaths caused by Covid-19, the origins of the virus and the vaccine and the rivalry generated between the presidency and state governments over solutions to the pandemic. The Zé Gotinha illustration (A)—originally posted by Cris Vector on January 7, 2021¹⁵—is an example of the first tendency, incorporating new elements into the originally friendly figure of the SUS mascot in order to challenge the actions and discourses of the president and his collaborators.

Eduardo Bolsonaro (Partido Liberal: PL), elected a federal deputy for São Paulo in 2018 with 1.84 million votes—the highest vote in recent Brazilian history—not only acted as a political ally of the federal government, but was also publicly considered one of its main spokespeople. Possessing a strong presence on social media platforms, the parliamentarian acts on the international front of the Bolsonaroist offensive and was even considered for the post of Brazilian ambassador during his father's administration, as well as chairing the Chamber of Deputies Foreign Relations and National Defence Committee between 2019 and 2021. Eduardo Bolsonaro also declared himself to be the 'Latin leader' of the international conservative movement envisioned by the political strategist Steve Bannon¹⁶ and is an articulator of the Brazilian edition of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC-Brazil)—working with members of the security forces expressing ideological affinities with the former president Jair Bolsonaro.

From the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil, Eduardo Bolsonaro made a series of public statements, many of them polemical and with a schismogenic potential. These were aimed both at the level of interpersonal relations and at the level of cooperation between nations, ranging from the virus's origin to the prophylactic measures and forms of containing the pandemic. This was when he was not making pungent criticisms of the work of the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI), which investigated possible crimes committed by the Bolsonaro government during the pandemic. Whether coining the term 'Chinese virus,' corroborating the idea of a supposed link between the emergence of the virus in China and Chinese food habits,¹⁷ alleging that lockdown would contribute to the virus's proliferation,¹⁸ or even criticizing the climate of surveillance surrounding the use of sanitary masks,¹⁹ the parliamentarian's statements amplified or explored paths not yet adopted in the attitudes and discourses of the president of the republic, acting like an unofficial spokesperson.

¹⁴ Obviously, illustrations on other topics were published during this period, though we shall not examine them here.

¹⁵ See <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJwZTVyl2Qp/>. Accessed 10 February 2024.

¹⁶ See G1. "Eduardo Bolsonaro se Declarou Líder Latino do Movimento Conservador Comandado por Bannon," 20 August 2020. Available at <https://g1.globo.com/mundo/noticia/2020/08/20/bannon-ex-estrategista-de-trump-que-foi-presos-mantinha-contato-com-os-bolsonaro.ghtml>. Accessed 10 February 2024.

¹⁷ See Rittner, Daniel. "Fala de que chineses 'comem tudo o que sol ilumina' ainda causa ressentimento em Pequim." 19 January 2021. Available at <https://valor.globo.com/brasil/noticia/2021/01/19/fala-de-que-chineses-comem-tudo-o-que-sol-ilumina-ainda-causa-ressentimento-em-pequim.ghtml> Accessed 10 February 2024.

¹⁸ See G1. "Twitter Coloca Aviso de Publicação Enganosa em Post de Eduardo Bolsonaro." 12 April 2021. Available at <https://g1.globo.com/bemestar/coronavirus/noticia/2021/04/12/twitter-coloca-aviso-de-publicacao-enganosa-em-post-de-eduardo-bolsonaro-sobre-lockdown.ghtml>. Accessed 10 February 2024.

¹⁹ See Ribeiro, Tayguara. "Enfia no rabo,' diz Eduardo Bolsonaro sobre o uso de máscara contra Covid." 11 March 2021. Available at <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2021/03/enfia-no-rabo-diz-eduardo-bolsonaro-sobre-uso-de-mascara-contr-covid.shtml>. Accessed 10 February 2024.

His statements advocating the use of hydroxychloroquine combined at least four vectors of resignification of the Covid-19 pandemic: a) pointing to an external culprit; b) alleging a deliberate exaggeration of the disease’s impacts; c) criticizing the methods proposed to contain the pandemic; d) seeking an immediate prophylactic for Covid-19 without passing through the protocols of scientific discussion.

In Cesarino (2022), we are presented with the dynamic structure that explains prolonged schismogenesis at the level of both the dominant public—which is also active and taken into account by the Bolsonarist communications ecosystem—and the antistructural public. In the former case, we can observe the cycle of statements, which provoke public indignation, answered with a message of reparation and a retreat by the politician, generating a feeling of relief among this public. In the case of antistructural publics, the declarations of the former president generate an enthusiastic response: approaching a state of making the schism concrete, they are followed by a retreat and breed a feeling of disappointment (ibid: 200).

To understand how the semiotic battle of the Zé Gotinhas fits into this dynamic structure, we can turn to a table comparing the versions of the character designed by Darlan Rosa and Cris Vector and the one posted by Eduardo Bolsonaro (Table 1).

Table 1 – Comparison of versions of Zé Gotinha

	Darlan Rosa	Cris Vector	Eduardo Bolsonaro
Body build	Infantile	Muscular Adult	Thin adult
Physiognomy	Slightly happy	Determined	Happy
Clothing	-	-	Brazilian flag as a cape
Accessories	-	Syringe with a hand rest, held like a rifle, with the logo of the Butantã Institute	Syringe with all the elements of an assault rifle except the barrel
Tattoos	-	SUS logo	-

Cris Vector’s communicational ingenuity for semiotic guerrilla warfare now seems clearer. His character has aged in relation to the first Zé Gotinha, developed muscles and a sense of determination expressed in his physiognomy, clutching the vaccine in his arms decisively like some kind of healthcare soldier wielding an assault rifle. The ideas of heteronormativity and a pro-gun politics may indeed appear here, but carefully calibrated so that its intentions are not mistaken: the illustration seems to have been designed to capture the attention of the Bolsonarist support base and generate some kind of positive metacommunication between this public and the idea of becoming vaccinated. The Zé Gotinha by Cris Vector does not cross the boundary separating a show of force from an existential threat to life. Rather, it establishes an ambiguity that proved effective in traversing the apparently impassable abyss that separates antistructural publics from dominant publics. Like a spanner that falls into the gears of a machine and, being the same colour as the rest of the metal parts, is only noted when the machine malfunctions, Cris Vector’s illustration really may have set the agenda for Bolsonarism. The intersection of influences of characters and people—Lula > Cristiano > Zé Gotinha—combined with Bolsonaro’s declining digital popularity at the start of 2021 (Nunes & Traumann 2023: 49), allowed the Zé Gotinha who fights against Covid-19 and defends the public health system (SUS) to affect, even if momentarily, the prolonged schismogenesis of Bolsonarism, subtly blurring the heteronormative and pro-gun values with the defence of vaccination and public health.

The effectiveness of Cristiano’s illustration resides, therefore, not only in its viralization but also in the generation of noise within the Bolsonarist communications ecosystem by circumventing the metacommunicational

friend-enemy coordinates of his publics, twisting the meaning of how a defender of public health and a fighter of the virus should be depicted, achieving a semiotic amplification through the association of unexpected new elements with the previously childlike and inoffensive figure of Darlan Rosa's Zé Gotinha.

This political tactic required an equally unexpected response from the Bolsonarist public insofar as, back in January 2021, Covid-19 vaccination was not launched as a national campaign, but rather as an initiative of the São Paulo state government led by governor João Dória (PSDB), a recognized right-winger. Hence, the pressure came from multiple directions: from the moderate left, in the shape of Lula, and from the moderate right, in the shape of Dória. They were accompanied by the entire traditional media, which, save for a few outlets, published daily articles and reports on the former president Jair Bolsonaro and his handling of the fight against the Sars-Cov-2 virus. This may have prompted the decision to create a conservative Zé Gotinha.

Considering the history of parliamentarian Eduardo Bolsonaro's public statements, the posting of an illustration of the famous icon of Brazil's national immunization campaigns would appear incongruous at the very least. Initially, it could even be interpreted as a change of stance—and there are many reasons why this might have been the case.

However, we argue that the divulgation of a conservative Zé Gotinha comprises a kind of tactical mirroring of a semiotic amplification and signals an initial retreat but with the tacit objective of keeping the Bolsonarist machinery running. The illustration was first published with the caption 'Our weapon now is the vaccine'—a screenshot of which was posted by Cris Vector—subsequently posted with the caption 'Our weapon is the vaccine,' leading us to two interpretative possibilities: the first is that the initial post contained a kind of 'Freudian slip,' while the second is that the presence of the 'now' would imply that the vaccine had previously not been a concern of either Eduardo or the government to which he was affiliated—including through kinship—and for which he was a proxy spokesman. These hypotheses do not lessen the chances that this action was taken for the purposes of strategic gain in a schismogenesis that may perhaps have culminated with Jair Bolsonaro's impeachment or the blocking of his candidature for 2022. While the political messages circulating through the Bolsonarist ecosystem had previously spanned from criticism of vaccination to neglect, now the parliamentarian was celebrating immunization: while before, in complementary fashion, Eduardo opposed the 'Chinese vaccine' for the 'Chinese virus,' from this point on he adopted the icon of Brazilian vaccination.

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's position in calling for the rehabilitation of Zé Gotinha reintroduced into political debate not just a character but an icon almost impossible to be interpreted as negative and that reiterates the commitment of those who evoke the figure to public health and fighting the pandemic. Cris Vector's semiotic amplification brought the character closer to meanings associated with the Bolsonarist publics and more familiar to them, clearing the way for a crossing-over of audiences—that is, the mitigation of continued schismogenesis in order to acquire a new public, who in turn could become new voters for the political left in 2022. Since Bolsonarism is reproduced from and on a permanently unstable battlefield, this operation involving the semiotic countereffectuation of schismogenesis demanded an equally refined response.

The impression of a change of stance²⁰ did not mean that the efficacy of the vaccines used in Brazil was no longer downplayed.²¹ The hypothesis of a self-enclosed symmetrical schismogenesis would thus imply considering only that 'the left continues to set the agenda for the right', as Cristiano stated in his post cited earlier. Instead, we can observe an apparent amplification of the meanings associated with Zé Gotinha in this everyday confrontation of positions that turned the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic into a daily reenactment of a semiotic guerrilla war. The adoption of a character, now particularized—or customized—with

20 See Marques, Hugo. "Família Bolsonaro Abraça a Campanha de Vacinação." *Veja*, 28 March 2021. Available at <https://veja.abril.com.br/politica/familia-bolsonaro-abraca-a-campanha-de-vacinacao/>. Accessed 10 February 2024.

21 See Mendonça, Ana. "Eduardo Bolsonaro Compara Tomar Vacina com Tratamento de Viciados em Crack." *Estado de Minas*, 15 June 2021. Available at https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2021/06/15/interna_politica.1276958/eduardo-bolsonaro-compara-tomar-vacina-com-tratamento-de-viciados-em-crack.shtml. Accessed 10 February 2024.

signs around which ideological elements orbit, like those of a *sui generis* nationalism and a pro-gun agenda, implied both the temporary suspension of the schismogenic cycle and the neutralization of criticisms of the positions of the former president Jair Bolsonaro concerning vaccines, possibly coming from dominant publics and that could affect the cohesion of antistructural publics. The Zé Gotinha that incorporates signs of Brazilian-style conservatism presupposes a left-wing Zé Gotinha, associated with the Chinese vaccine and the Chinese Communist Party—one that in reality never existed. On the other hand, given that this social media post did not preclude subsequent declarations criticizing vaccination, the conservative Zé Gotinha can be seen as merely a strategic retreat in the interpersonal and institutional communications of the parliamentarian, contemplating both potential allies discontent with the government handling of the pandemic and those seeking to offer a public response to the criticisms made of the federal government. In other words, a Zé Gotinha carrying a rifle and draped in a Brazilian flag was a microtargeting tactic, precisely because of its polysemic character.

This offensive-retreat, this form of appearing while ceding ground and keeping a flag raised, incorporated into the movement of acquiring semiotic amplitude a practice of microtargeting or microsegmentation. Originating in the areas of communication and marketing, this term refers to the dissemination of symbols, indices and signs with the potential to reach small groups of people with a high degree of precision. Apply this definition to the context of elections, Madsen observes that:

Fundamentally, the electorate is heterogeneous in their beliefs, desires and preferences. Due to this, campaigners may go beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and design persuasive attempts that are intended for a specific subset of the population rather than the population as a whole. This is micro-targeting: the design of messages that are specifically developed to resonate with a desired target audience. By collecting relevant data about each voter, campaigners can build models that segment the electorate into increasingly specific and sophisticated categories. (Madsen 2019: viii)

There is no space here to discuss the ways in which the tactics of micro-targeting have been imported from the electoral campaign into the communications strategy of the federal deputy's mandate. However, the context in which the illustration of the conservative Zé Gotinha was posted amplified the polysemic nature of the image of a muscular Zé Gotinha fighting Covid-19, ranging from an attempt to mitigate criticism of the federal government's actions in relation to the vaccine to recognizing the impact that President Luiz Inácio's statement had achieved on public opinion. This image, which is also composite, provides clues to its role in re-signifying the pandemic. Moreover, this polysemy of the image contains specific messages, highly condensed in a reappropriated icon. In other words, the *in praesenti* polysemy of its publication is the source for the signifying particularity that presents the conservative Zé Gotinha as an equally effective response to the statements of Lula and Cris Vector's image, temporarily suspending the divergences between what Zé Gotinha signifies to the Bolsonaro public and the rest of the Brazilian population. Force of circumstance thus lead to the rebirth of a conservative Zé Gotinha while the machinery of perpetuated schismogenesis was restarted.

The oscillation from heresy to schism—from existential threat to intra-doctrinal opposition—signified a softening of the schismogenic process in order to avoid a political defeat on the issue of public health. Although its ultimate purpose may be difficult to apprehend, the offensive-retreat can be judged to have kept open the passage between antistructural publics so that new voters could also be won over in 2022 while their captive publics were vaccinated²² against any offensive by groups opposing the then president in relation to immunization policy, the fight against the pandemic and the economic response to the impacts of Sars-Cov-2 on the Brazilian population.

22 A term from political communication terminology referring to the emission of a message intended to protect a public from adverse counter-arguments.

Conclusion

Over the previous pages we have explored schismogenesis in politics as discussed in Bateson and Cesarino, the favourable environment provided by digital social networks for the construction of relations with a schismogenic potential, and finally recent forms of citizen participation in politics through social media.

Examining the controversies surrounding the icon Zé Gotinha, transformed by new signs in a context of prolonged schismogenesis, we shed light on a semiotic guerrilla war that unfolded through a series of retreats and advances. In this context, Eduardo Bolsonaro strategically and deliberately suspended the schismogenic process in order to mitigate a communicational tactic of his opponents and exploit the opportunity to amplify the reach of his message on the Covid-19 pandemic.

Observed from the perspective of the symmetrical conflict only, the battle discussed here—amid the fears, uncertainties, desires and political commitments provoked by the Covid-19 pandemic—allows us to interpret Cris Vector's post on the Twitter/X social network as an act of rebellion with a high degree of effectiveness in 'set the agenda for the right.' However, if we approach the specific battle between Cristiano and the parliamentarian as a clash between proxies for Lula and Bolsonaro respectively, insertable in a dynamic structure of offensives and retreats based on a friend-enemy logic aimed at the construction of a new form of communicational and political action of the far right in Brazil, something else becomes apparent: we can not that the momentary effectiveness of Cristiano's illustration of Zé Gotinha simply led to one more of the countless strategic course corrections undertaken by the Bolsonarist communications ecosystem. Through a careful suspension of the schismogenic process, this enabled the creation of a character highly advantageous to the argument that Jair Bolsonaro had in fact advocated Covid-19 vaccination.

While one version of the figure initially invoked an infallible response to the disarticulation of the Bolsonarist ecosystem through a kind of semiotic camouflage, the other version demonstrated the resilience of Bolsonarism, which, even in situations of tacit threat, manages to recognise a danger to the maintenance of its publics, comprehends it at some depth and neutralizes the threat with equal efficiency.

This symbolic efficacy helps us understand Jair Bolsonaro's electoral performance in 2022, which, despite his low popularity ratings and the strongly critical campaigns of opponents—in which the battle depicted here was just one episode—meant that the candidate for re-election was defeated by a margin of less than 2% of votes. Here one of the dimensions of this efficacy is manifested: the disarming of indices with a high semiotic impact on antistructural publics through the oscillation between heresy and schism, existential threat and partial identification, in order to correct the course of its actions. In other words, a strategic symbolic adaptability rather than a supposed rigidity.

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Kelly Cristiane da Silva

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3388-2655>

kellysa87@gmail.com

Fábio de Oliveira Martins

Mestre em Antropologia Social.

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0212-0017>

contato@fabiomartins.me

Dossier editors

Marco Julián Martínez Moreno (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8223-5169>)

Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Museu Nacional, Programa de Pós-graduação em Antropologia Social, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil

Email: akkmjm@gmail.com

Ana María Forero Angel (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2483-1154>)

Universidad de Los Andes, Departamento de Antropología, Colômbia

Email: am.forero260@uniandes.edu.co