

CONSPIRACY THEORIES, MESSIANIC POPULISM AND EVERYDAY SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZIL: A GLOCAL SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Scholars have highlighted the bond between digital populism and conspiracy theories. They have also shown that conspiracy theories from around the globe rely on similar narrative patterns, as well as that being locally adapted. This paper adds to this body of research by exploring the glocal dimension of populist conspiracy theories in the contemporary Brazilian political context. Using a semiotic approach to glocalization, I tackle one recurrent motif of global conspiracy theories: the domination of the elites over the people, which contributed to the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, as well as to the rise of his approval rating in 2019 and 2020. I argue that this particular narrative feature has taken on, in Bolsonaro's case, shapes and tones which are directly related to the local religious semiosphere, especially the Neo-Pentecostal evangelical messianism: indeed, the image of Bolsonaro as a national messiah is characterized by a high rate of mysticism, eschatology and aesthetic load, which are three of the main distinctive traits in Brazilian evangelicalism. Moreover, I discuss the role of everyday social media use in this glocal meaning-making process. I show how on Bolsonaroist public WhatsApp groups, everyday banalities, global and local populist, conspiracy and religious narratives were mixed in a way that fostered the image of Bolsonaro as a martyr and a political messiah anointed by the Lord.

Keywords: glocalization, conspiracy theories, digital populism, messianism, Brazil.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary right-wing populist leaders such as Donald Trump, Matteo Salvini and Viktor Orbán often use the same discursive strategies in order to communicate their political ideology on social media (Da Empoli 2019; Sedda, Demuru 2018;

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2019; Demuru, Sedda 2020). Among other features, they frequently allude to online conspiracy theories such as *QAnon* or *The Great Replacement*. According to *QAnon*, a faction of Satan-worshipping paedophiles is manoeuvring against the United States of America and the former president Donald Trump, who was elected to fighting the cabal (Cosentino 2020). On several occasions, Trump himself appealed to *QAnon* adepts by retweeting contents and accounts related to this conspiracy theory¹. The same happened with respect to *The Great Replacement*, which sustains that a group of elites are plotting to replace Europe with non-European peoples, particularly Arab, Berbers and Muslims from North Africa and the Middle East (Butter, Kinght 2020). In the last years, Matteo Salvini and Viktor Orbán implicitly referred to *The Great Replacement* plot by claiming that “there are political forces in Europe that want a replacement of population for ideological or other reasons”² or that “an ethnic substitution is underway in Europe” (my translation)³.

Jair Messias Bolsonaro, the current right-wing President of the Brazilian Republic, who was elected in October 2018, also usually refers to secret plans and conspiracies that are being implemented in order to destroy Brazil and its population. On September 6, 2018, Bolsonaro was stabbed in the belly during a campaign rally in Juiz de Fora. The perpetrator of the attack, who had once been affiliated to the leftist party PSOL, was declared “not guilty” because of his mental condition. Despite the lack of any evidence, Bolsonaro, his family and social media followers have often insinuated that the attack had been prepared by “the left” and that it was all part of a secret plan by “the system” to take him down⁴.

This was not the first time that Bolsonaro and Bolsonarists mentioned the existence of hidden plots against him, Brazil and the Brazilians. Since at least 2016, when Bolsonaro emerged as a potential candidate for the Presidency, their allusions to national and international conspiracies became a frequently used resource. From time to time, particular actors such as the “Foro de São Paulo”⁵, the former presidents Luis Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, the Chinese government (during the COVID-19 pandemic) or much vaguer and secret entities like

“the establishment” and “the system” are being identified as the authors of anti-Brazilian conspiracy plans.

As a consequence of this narrative, populist leaders often arise as real saviours of the nation. They are seen by conspiracy theories adepts as the chosen ones to lead people in their fight against the elites. In some cases, as for Bolsonaro and Trump, their image acquires a sort of a messianic aura, in which politics and religion are constantly mixed and overlap each other.

That said, what does Bolsonaro’s discourse have in common with that of Trump and the other populist leaders mentioned above? Besides the opposition between the people and the elites, are there other recurrent discursive strategies, narratives motifs and plots on which contemporary conspiracy theories rely? If yes, how are they locally translated? How has this been done in Brazil by “Bolsonarism” (as Bolsonaro’s ideology is called)? And what is the role of social media in this process?

In this paper, I will try to answer these questions. Using a semiotic approach to glocalization, I argue that the bond between populism and conspiracy theories have taken on, in Bolsonarism, messianic shapes and tones which are directly related to Brazilian Neo-Pentecostal evangelicalism, especially that of churches such as *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (IURD) and *Assembleia de Deus Vitória em Cristo* (ADVEC).

I claim that the image of Bolsonaro as a national messiah is characterized by a high rate of eschatology, mysticism and aesthetic load⁶, which all are main features of the evangelical leader’s discourse. I also argue that the everyday use of social media played a crucial role in such a glocal meaning-making process. Particularly, on Bolsonarist public WhatsApp groups, everyday banalities, global and local conspiracy narratives and religious narratives, were mixed in a way that fostered and naturalized the image of Bolsonaro as a martyr and a political messiah sent by the Lord.

As well as in other countries and especially in Trump’s USA, in Bolsonaro’s Brazil the link between global anti-elitist conspiracy narratives and the stereotype of the national saviour who fights against the establishment relies in messianic beliefs.

However, this is done accordingly to the local dominant discourses that circulate in the Brazilian political and cultural semiosphere (Lotman 1985).

The messianic appeal of Bolsonaro's conspiracy narrative does not alone explain his success. This is only a particular cog in a more complex discursive machinery with a large set of features and strategies (Sedda, Demuru 2018). Nonetheless, its understating is crucial to comprehend the functioning of Bolsonaro's populist discourse, and possibly its efficacy, especially in the light of the consistent rise of evangelicalism in Brazil⁷.

A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO GLOCALIZATION

As Giulianotti and Robertson (2007: 60) argue, glocalization registers "the simultaneous co-presence of sameness and difference, and the intensified interpenetration of the local and the global, the universal and particular, and homogeneity and heterogeneity". Glocalization highlights how social and cultural identities, everyday life practices and interactions, as well as collective beliefs, are defined through the articulation between local and global systems and processes of meaning (Appadurai 1996).

Drawing on Sedda's semiotic approach, I tackle glocalization as a semiotic device "in which a *globality* and a *locality* are not given as ontological entities but as *relative and relational meaningful effects* departing from strategies and tactics of *incorporation* that are played through specific *force and power relations*" (Sedda 2014: 48, italics in the original). From such a theoretical perspective, the relevant question is not "what" is glocalization, but rather "how" glocalization emerges as such: how something is defined as both global and local, universal and particular? Upon which semiotic choices and strategies this kind of identity is built?

The functioning of the semiotic device of glocalization is based on semiotic translation processes. I am not referring here to intersemiotic translation (the way in which a language is translated into another), but rather to cultural semiotic translation, i.e. to the way in which elements from a particular cultural

universe are translated within other cultural spheres. Sports, religions and gastronomic habits provide a set of significant examples of this kind of translation (Demuru 2014; Giulianotti, Robertson 2007; Sedda, Stano, forthcoming). Building on James Clifford's study (2001) on the translation of the Gospel into Kanak language and culture, Sedda (2012) shows, for instance, how the Kanak people interpreted the Christian Trinity (God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit) as a dual entity with both masculine and feminine traits. Such an interpretation was built according to the Kanak local religious system, which was based on a dual totemic system, and specifically on the divine figures of Bao and Kanya.

This example reveals what is in fact a cultural semiotic translation: a process through which expressions and contents from a given cultural system (Greimas 1989) are transposed and inscribed within another cultural system according to its own rules and to internal and external forces and relations of power (Sedda 2012: 55). When speaking of expressions and content I also refer to the passional and affective dimension of the meaning-making process (Marrone 2001; Landwski 2005), which is also crucial in cultural-semiotic translation dynamics (Fabbri 2000).

Glocalization works in the same way. The glocal nature of a social or cultural identity, a way of life, an everyday life practice, a story, a narrative motif, a myth, a symbol, a collective passion or mood depends on the way in which it combines global and local expressions and contents, such as the figure of God and his respective meanings. As Greimas (1989: 32) argues, it is the way in which humans build their own semiotic reading grid of the world that "makes it intelligible and manageable [...] through which we read which causes the world to signify for and it does so by allowing us to identify figures as objects, to classify them and link them together, to interpret movements as processes which are attributable or not attributable to subjects, and so on".

Bolsonaro's populist conspiracy narrative is also built upon this logic. His discourse, as well as that of his internet followers, mixes global and local figures, themes, motifs and symbols in order to build the image of a national saviour with very specific

messianic features, which appear to be related to the local evangelical religious semiosphere.

In order to show how this happens, I first tackle the core discursive features of contemporary digital populist discourse and conspiracy theories. Then, I will display how the Bolsonarist movement is translated within the present Brazilian political and sociocultural semiosphere.

DIGITAL POPULISM: A WORLDWIDE SEMIOTIC PHENOMENON

Defining populism has always been an arduous task. Scholars in realms ranging from political science, sociology, philosophy, semiotics, communication and media studies have tackled the subject both from a theoretical and empirical standpoint (de la Torre 2019). Nonetheless, despite the differences between disciplinary approaches and perspectives, it is generally agreed that populism is an ideology “that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6).

Alongside the antagonism between the pure people and the corrupt elite, there are also three other core features that define populism as a political phenomenon. Firstly, as the term itself suggests, populist movements and leaders are “people-centered”, that is, they celebrate the popular sovereignty (Woods 2104). Secondly, they are widely nationalistic, especially right-wing ones: the praise of national-popular culture and identity is developed, as well as the aversion towards transnational organization and institution (Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Thirdly, the cult of a leader, depicted both as an ordinary man of the people and an extraordinary saviour of the nation – when not really a supposed messiah, as in Bolsonaro and Trump’s case – is a pillar of both ancient and contemporary populisms (Moffit 2016; Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

Just like television was crucial for the rise of twentieth century populism (Eco 2006), social media played a central role in the

growth of those of the twenty-first century. Scholars have started to use expressions such as “Populism 2.0” (Gerbaudo 2014; Revelli 2017) or “Digital populism” (Dal Lago 2017) precisely to highlight the intimate bond between social media and contemporary populist movements around the globe. According to these studies, social media came to be understood as democratic platform “for the voice of the people in opposition to the mainstream news media, accused of being in cahoots with the financial and political establishment” (Gerbaudo 2018: 748-749).

In his book *Gli ingegneri del caos* (“The engineers of chaos”), Da Empoli (2019) reveals Steve Bannon’s influence on the communication tactics of populist leaders and movements such as Trump, Salvini, The Five Star Movement, Le Pen, Orbán, Farage, Brexit. As da Empoli argues, Bannon’s model of online propaganda and engagement – as well as that of Gianroberto Casaleggio, co-founder, with Beppe Grillo, of the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (Five Star Movement) – provided a strategic infrastructure for the rise of such a “populist international”. According to the author, its worldwide growth and success is due to a sense of community belonging and direct influence in the democratic process promoted by the populist everyday use of social media.

Semiotics contributes to this body of research by tackling contemporary digital populism as a global discourse with a very specific set of features (Sedda, Demuru 2018, 2019). For the purpose of this article, it is relevant to highlight the following: *a)* semantic vagueness and hermeticism, mostly canalised into “empty signifiers” such as “the people”, “the elites”, “the system” (Laclau 2005), which may refer to different values and actors as well as to “anti-people” secret plans (Eco 1990); *b)* the “negative” construction of identity, i.e. the fact that populists define themselves in opposition to something or someone they consider as an “enemy of the people” (Sedda, Demuru 2018); *c)* the abuse of polarized opposition such as the one between “the people” and “the elite” and other “Us-Them” antagonist relationships; *d)* the simulacrum of a direct contact between the people and the leader, which revolves around the “phatic function” of online communication (Marrone 2017; Sedda 2016); *e)*

the emphasis on the affective and aesthetic dimension of discursive interactions, in which body language, moods and the seek for an affective bond between groups of peoples and individuals is crucial (Landowski 2018; Sedda, Demuru 2018, 2019).

Populists from different continents and countries rely on such a set of discursive features when it comes to communicating their political identity and ideology. However, they mix and adapt them according to their specific social and cultural context. For instance, European populist movements frequently and consistently stigmatize migrants as a major threat for national sovereignty. Conversely, in Bolsonaro's Brazil, where immigration is not seen as a major issue, the most dangerous enemies are "Left" and the "Globalist elites".

GLOCAL CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES: PLOTS AND MOTIFS

Scholars have highlighted the bond between contemporary populism and conspiracy theories (Bergmann 2018). As Bergmann and Butter argue (2020: 334), the populist appeal of conspiracy theories relies in the fact that they "offer a specific explanation as to why the elites act against the interests of the people". Populists often use conspiracy narratives to portray themselves as anti-establishment figures and cast suspicions on public and private institution, traditional politicians and scientific authorities (Taggart 2019).

As for populisms, social media provided a breeding ground for the spread of conspiracy theories (Bergmann 2018; Madison, Ventsel 2020). The polarized and emotion-centred internet environment fostered the growth of conspiracy narratives beliefs, which, conversely, contributed to the increase of online social and political polarization. As resumed in an FBI report published in May 2019 – which demonstrates how the issue is being taken seriously even by the governmental intelligence agency – "conspiracy theories will very likely emerge, spread,

and evolve in the modern information marketplace, occasionally driving both groups and individual extremists to carry out criminal or violent acts”⁸.

Online conspiracy theories from around the globe rely on similar narrative plots, rhetoric strategies, thematic roles and figures (Butter, Knight 2020; Leone 2016; Leone, Madisson, Ventsel 2020; Madisson, Ventsel 2020). Let us look more thoroughly, for example, at how Wikipedia describes *QAnon* and *The Great Replacement* conspiracy theories. According to the unknown authors of the free internet encyclopaedia: “*QAnon* is a disproven and discredited far-right conspiracy theory alleging that a cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles is running a global child sex-trafficking ring and plotting against US president Donald Trump, who is [secretly] fighting the cabal [...] *QAnon* supporters have accused many liberal Hollywood actors, Democratic politicians, and high-ranking government officials of being members of the cabal”⁹. *The Great Replacement* theory is described in an analogous fashion: “a white nationalist far-right conspiracy theory which states that, with the complicity or cooperation of “replacist” elites, the white French population as well as the white European population at large, is being progressively replaced with non-European peoples”¹⁰.

Both descriptions are based on the same narrative plot: the conflict between the “good people” and the “evil elites/cabals”. Moreover, the elites always act behind the scenes. There is constantly a secret plan that is being developed and implemented, be it the “cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles” or the “replacist elites”.

This aura of mystery and secret is one of the main distinctive traits of conspiracy narratives, from Anti-Semitism to New World Order, Pizzagate, *QAnon* and *The Great Replacement* (Leone 2016; Leone, Madisson, Ventsel 2020). As Thornbury pointed out, for *QAnon* believers, in particular, “this secret is a literary motif that is hard to resist”¹¹. However, in order to keep it alive, the mystery cannot be solved completely. Drawing on Umberto Eco’s notion of “hermetic semiosis” (1990), it could be said that conspiracy theories promote enigmatic discourses whose success relies on the survival of the very secrets they claim to someday reveal. This is the reason why, at the same

time that the secret is uncovered, it is also moved elsewhere (Eco 1990: 47).

In face of this scenario, populist leaders often arise as saviours of the nation, showing their will, strength and potential to fight the elites. In order to do that, they usually combine their alleged ordinariness – the fact that they often depict themselves as normal people just like everyone else – with extraordinary leadership qualities (Moffit 2016). In some cases, such as for Trump or Bolsonaro, this extraordinariness acquires a messianic aura: their battle against the establishment became a crusade-like mission (Hills 2017; Bonfim 2020).

Vagueness and polysemy are other core features of conspiracy theories. From the perspective of a conspiracy theory adept, everything could be meaningful. As Eco argues, conspiracy narratives foster a “paranoid interpretation” (Eco 1990: 50) according to which any apparently insignificant sign could reveal the secret conspirators’ secret plan. The sign of conspiracy are also empty signifiers which can be filled with multiple contents according to a specific need or situation. Moreover, the paranoid interpretation is always open to new possible understandings of the conspiracy itself. Not only the occult powers which runs the world could remain vague, but they can also include, from time to time, different actors (George Soros, Barack Obama, the Clintons, the European Union, Russia, China and so on) and causes (the implementation of a socialist world order, ethnic substitution, Anti-Christianism, among others).

Conspiracy theories also rely on aesthetic and affective semiosis. Precise collective passions such as anger and fear, as well more undefined aesthetic loads, tensions and moods are crucial for the spread of conspiracy narratives, especially on social media (Landowski 2018; Sedda, Demuru 2018). Furthermore, as Madisson and Ventsel argue (2020: 97), such an affective semiosis “fulfils the phatic function of communication that is primarily expressed in confirming the belonging of those engaged in communication”.

Even though they are present on a global scale, these features are usually used by populist leaders and movements according to the logics of their specific national political, social and cultural systems. As an example, COVID-19 conspiracy

narratives about China's role in creating and spreading the virus were mixed, in Bolsonaroist social media forums, to other local conspiracy plots and motifs. Bolsonaro's political opponents, such as João Dória, the Governor of the State of São Paulo, were depicted as members of the cabal that produced the SARS-CoV-2 with the intention of implementing socialism and anti-Christianism in Brazil and in the rest of the world.

QAnon is also an emblematic case of such a glocal scholars and journalist have pointed out that *QAnon* narrative is related to the American conspiracy culture, evangelical discourse and paganism. As Adrienne La France observed in an in-depth report on "The Atlantic", while *QAnon* narrative is "propelled by paranoia and populism, it is also propelled by religious faith. The language of evangelical Christianity has come to define the Q movement. *QAnon* marries an appetite for the conspiratorial with positive beliefs about a radically different and better future, one that is preordained"¹². Moreover, as a phenomenon linked to the symbolic universe of the American Alt-Right, *QAnon* mixes elements from Norse and Greco-Roman mythology (Shaw 2019). Finally, as Cosentino (2020) argues, the symbolic universe and the practices of the videogame culture, as well as those of social networks like 4chan, played a leading role in the construction of *QAnon*'s conspiracy discourse:

the game-like participation in *QAnon* is one of its most appealing aspects, and it reflects a common trait of online conspiracy theory and online harassment campaigns, which entice new members with entertaining experience such as scoring points, gaining status within the community or increasing its visibility. This is of course also a reflection of the subcultural milieu of 4chan, infused with reference to videogame culture.

These overlaps became evident in the protests that led, in January 2021, to the invasion of the Capitol in Washington by Trump followers. Among them, there were people tattooed with symbols from Norse mythology – like Jake Angeli, the so-called "QAnon Shaman", on whose abdomen tipped a hammer of Thor¹³ – and videogames such as *Disonhored*, an action and adventure game by Arkane Studios¹⁴.

The messiah motif also reveals how conspiracy narratives are semiotically translated within local cultural contexts. For instance, Trump’s messianic figure mixes the discourses mentioned above. As *QAnon*’s meaning-making process as a whole, his image-building process relies in the blending of features from the American popular conspiracy culture – literature, movies, tv shows (Dalsgaard 2019)¹⁵ – and the evangelical imagery. According to *QAnon*’s narrative, Trump appears both as a pop superhero (Schneiker 2020) and a religious messiah (Hills 2017). Trump himself played such claims on several occasions, suggesting either that he is “The Chosen One”, “The King of Israel”¹⁶, “Batman”¹⁷ or “Superman”¹⁸.

Putin’s conservative turn is also another example of how populism, messianism and conspiracy theories have been used according to specific cultural constraints. As Engström argues, such a political change is associated with the Orthodox theological concept of *Katechon*:

that protects the world from the advent of the Antichrist [and] originates in the Byzantine Empire. In Russian tradition, this concept is presented in the well-known doctrine of Moscow as the Third Rome, dating back to the 16th century. The concept of Russia as *Katechon* is directly connected to the national security and defence policy, because it is used as the ideological ground for the new wave of militarization and anti-Western sentiment (Engström 2014: 356).

As we shall see in the next sections, Bolsonaro’s populist-messianic aura is mostly built upon the Brazilian evangelical language and imagery. Moreover, while *QAnon*’s success seems to owe much to the gamification logics of 4chan, WhatsApp and its everyday discursive background were crucial both for spreading conspiracy narratives and boosting the messianic dimension of Bolsonarism.

MESSIANISM AND CONSPIRACIES IN BOLSONARO'S POPULISM: BETWEEN THE GLOBAL AND THE LOCAL

Bolsonaro's case provide a fertile ground to explore how global populist conspirative narrative plots and motifs are articulated within local sociocultural contexts through the semiotic correlation between expressions and contents (Sedda 2012). Bolsonaro's second name is Messias: Jair Messias Bolsonaro. On several occasions he himself joked about the destiny embodied in his name¹⁹. Yet, this is a joke that Bolsonaro seems to take seriously sometimes. On 19 May 2019, for instance, he published a video of the Congolese pastor Steve Kunda hailing him as national messiah on his Facebook profile. These were the exact words used by Kunda to describe Bolsonaro:

let's say it is new time. I don't do politics, I'm a pastor. But I believe that we have to influence politics. The church is not just about praying morning, night and afternoon. The church is influencing society in a positive and not just in a negative way. In the history of the Bible, there were politicians who were established by God. An example is the emperor of Persia Cyrus. Before his birth, God spoke through Isaiah: "I choose my servant Cyrus". And Mr Jair Bolsonaro is the Brazilian Cyrus. I do not live here. But I speak from God. Whether you accept it or not, whether you are left or right, Mr. Jair Bolsonaro is the Brazilian Cyrus. God chose him for a new time, for a new season in Brazil²⁰.

On Easter Day 2020 (12 April), Bolsonaro linked the attempt on his life to the resurrection of Christ. During a conference with Brazilian religious leaders, he stated: "I would like to say something, since we are talking about resurrection: I did not die, but I was on the verge of death [...]. And then another miracle happened: I did not have the profile for Presidency. I had no chances to succeed [in the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections]. I did not even have a party until March 2018".

This image-building strategy became clear in the 2018 elections. Bolsonaro's presidential campaign was infused by religious tones and themes. The slogan "Brazil above everything, God above all" is probably the most significant example of the

crucial role of religion in the discourse of the Brazilian President. On January 1st, 2019, during the inauguration ceremony of his presidency, Bolsonaro said that the “Brazilian flag would never be red” and that this would only happen “if it took blood to keep it green and yellow”²¹. Such claims reinforced not only the messianic aura of his leadership, but also his image as a martyr, who has almost died for his nation.

The electoral success of Bolsonaro’s messianic discourse is certainly due to historical, social, and political reasons. In this regard, it must be said, firstly, that the number of Neo-Pentecostal evangelicals have dramatically increased in Brazil in the last 30 years²², as well as the participation of the evangelical in the political debate, especially on social media (Cunha 2019). Secondly, the fall of Lula’s and PT’s era, culminated in the impeachment of the former President Dilma Rousseff in August 2016 and in Lula’s arrest in April 2018, as part of the so-called Car Wash Investigation, afforded the rise of anti-political sentiments: the whole Brazilian political system began to be seen as corrupted and morally degraded. Moreover, both the defeat against Germany in the 2014 FIFA World Cup (7-1) and the media narratives about the economic crises, contributed to the lack of credibility of traditional politics, public administration and mainstream media such as “Rede Globo”, as well to the loss of confidence in the idea of Brazil as “the country of the future”, which spread internationally during Lula’s mandates (Demuru 2018).

Bolsonaro’s messianic populism arose from this scenario. His tale of salvation, infused by references to the Christian evangelical symbolic universe, filled the narrative void opened by the crises mentioned above. Bolsonaro’s Evangelical baptism occurred in the Jordan River on the same day that the Brazilian Senate voted to open the impeachment trial of the former President Dilma Rousseff (May 12, 2016). Moreover, his candidacy was supported by Edir Macedo, leader of the Evangelical Church IURD and owner of Grupo Record – a broadcasting company which includes TV Record, Brazil’s third largest television network in terms of audience –, Silas Malafaia, the spiritual head of the ADVEC, among others. The first thing he did as President elect was a collective prayer, led by the evangelical pastor and congressman Magno Malta. As Malta said:

we began this adventure by praying. And God's movements.... No one will ever be able to explain it... The tentacles of the Left would never have been ripped off without the hand of the Lord [...]. We must thank the Lord for what he did: he raised Jair Bolsonaro twice, because the Lord did not let him die [referring to the attack suffered by Bolsonaro during his campaign] [...]. The Lord anointed Jair Bolsonaro and, starting today, he will be the president of all, a president who loves his homeland, a true Christian, a patriot full of faith, courage and hope²³.

As Malta's word displays, such a messianic aura is constantly mixed with conspiracy narratives of various kinds, in which the plan of the Brazilian establishment to take on the people is overlapped with that of the international "Anti-Christian" and "Globalist elites".

Globalism is a recurrent term in Bolsonarism, which is also used by Trump, Bannon and the American alt-right (Stack 2016). As pointed out by Filipe Martins, Bolsonaro's advisor for international affairs, Globalism is a political project that "wants to destroy nation-states to favor the political interests of a transnational or post-national elite [...] deprive man of freedom and their sense of purpose"²⁴. For this reason, as he continues, "Brazil has to take a stand before the world clash between sovereignty and globalism, in which not only the existence of the nation is at stake, but also the Christian-Western civilizational legacy and the very essence of the man in his presence before himself and the existential mystery".

Other exponents of Bolsonarism, such as Olavo de Carvalho, a major intellectual guide of the movement, and Ernesto de Araujo, Bolsonaro's Foreign Minister, have described Globalism with almost the exact same words. According to Araujo, Globalism "tries to formulate, in a clumsy way, a kind of new religion, with pseudo-values [...] like human rights, tolerance, environmental protection" (Araujo 2019: 12). In the light of the rise of such an ideology, it becomes necessary to "reintroduce God to that citadel of liberal society, replacing this atheistic religion of the politically correct" (Araujo 2019: 13).

Even though Bolsonarists don't mention its name, Globalism reminds the New World Order conspiracy theory, which



Fig. 1. Bolsonaro's Instagram post on Christfobia.

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/jairmessiasbolsonaro/?hl=pt-br>; <http://www.whatsapp-monitor.dcc.ufmg.br/brazil>.

also predicts the rise of a new global elitist government, as well as, in some of its versions, the end of Christianity. As Martins and Araujo argue, a major consequence of Globalism would be exactly the end of Christian-Western legacy, which is linked to another global conspiracy movement: Cultural Marxism, according to which intellectual and academics are subverting the Christian values of traditional conservatism to promote liberalism, multiculturalism and gender ideology.

Such a religious threat is a motif that often returns to Bolsonaro's discourse. In his UN address in September 2020, the Brazilian president defended the fight against the international rise of "Cristofobia" (Christfobia). One month later, he posted on his Instagram account a photo of a burning church in Santiago del Chile, which was invaded during the protests that preceded the 2020 Constitutional Referendum. As Bolsonaro's states in his post: "In my UN address, I denounced the existence of a great persecution of Christian around the world: Christfobia. Today, churches have been burned in Chile by leftist groups". The image itself is a significant example of the dangers prospected by Bolsonaro (fig. 1).

The same image was shared on Bolsonarist WhatsApp groups throughout the same week, followed by this message: "#ChristianDoesNotVoteForLeftist; #ChristianDoesNotVoteForTheLeft; Let's spread this idea". Many others, with the same motifs and tones, were posted in the following days, which show how both Bolsonaro's and WhatsApp discourses intimately related.

According to these narratives, the President of the Brazilian Republic is fighting against those global leftist-antichristian conspiracies as a real messiah would do. As Araujo stated referring to Bolsonaro's address in the Davos 2019 World Economic Forum, "Bolsonaro spoke of God [...]. I believe it was probably the first time that a head of state uses the word God believing in Him, especially at the Davos Forum. And I think this is it, that the moment we are living in is this: it is God in Davos" (Araujo 2019: 14).

Bolsonaro's populist messianic discourse refers thus to the same conspiracy motifs used by Trump and other contemporary

far-right populist leaders. His claims about Christofobia and persecution of Christians around the world echoes not only *QAnon*, but also *The Great Replacement* conspiracy theory, to which Salvini and Orbán often allude. Especially the latter have fostered the idea of a new global Christian persecution, embracing Christianity and using religion as powerful political-discursive tool²⁵.

However, Bolsonarism has his own specificities, which depend on the way in which the features of the global populist narratives are strategically translated within the Brazilian cultural, social and political context, as well as on the role played by social media in this meaning-making process.

In this regard, it could be first said that the religious dimension of Bolsonaro's messianism seems to be stronger than those of other contemporary populist leaders. To be more specific, Bolsonarism often abuses of three particular tools of the evangelical discourse: eschatology, mysticism and affective-aesthetic communication. Magno Malta's prayer, as well as fig. 1 above, are a first example of that. Moreover, as we will later discuss in this article Bolsonaro himself appears to adopt and promote his political-religious messianic image through verbal and visual semiotic choices more frequently and explicitly than other politicians.

Secondly, the everyday use of social media such as WhatsApp by Bolsonarist groups, in which politics, religion and everyday life co-exist and are constantly mixed, appears to be crucial to the consolidation of Bolsonaro's messianic conspiratorial populism, as well as of his image of national messiah. While *QAnon* conspiratorial messianism relies on the game-like participation and in the discursive themes, figures and practices of 4chan, Bolsonaro's messianism owes much to the semiotic logics and interactions of the everyday use of Whatsapp.

Theoretically speaking, this reveals that Bolsonaro's messianic image is built upon a glocal semiotic process of translation (Sedda 2014), in which the plots, motifs, themes and figures of global conspiracy narratives are mixed to those from the Brazilian political and religious semiosphere. Moreover, the crucial role of WhatsApp in the Brazilian social and political scenario, as well as the specificities of its local use, display that such a glocal translation process not only concerns building narratives

about the clash between the people and the Globalist-Anti-Christian elites, but also everyday practices and routines such as social media use and interaction.

In order to show how this takes place in detail, I shall start from the role of WhatsApp in shaping Bolsonaro populist-conspiracy messianism. Then, I will tackle the bond between it and the Brazilian evangelical discourse, exploring eschatology, mysticism and the affective-aesthetic engagement that it promotes.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES, POLITICS AND RELIGION IN BRAZILIAN EVERYDAY WHATSAPP USE

WhatsApp is the most used messaging app in Brazil, with 120 million users²⁶. 79 per cent of them use the platform as a primary news source²⁷. However, recent research has shown the role of WhatsApp in spreading misinformation (Resende et al. 2019;) and conspiracies theories of all kinds (Oliveira 2020), as well as the role of Bolsonarist WhatsApp public groups in fostering both of them (Chagas et al. 2019).

Using the WhatsApp Monitor developed by a research team from the University of Minas Gerais²⁸, it could be perceived that politics and religion are two of the main narrative pillars of Bolsonarist WhatsApp public groups. Messages such as “Good morning. May God bless our day. The secret is to wake up in the morning, decide that your day will be happy and fight for that” (left image in fig. 2) are constantly mixed with memes, audios, videos that celebrate Bolsonaro’s figure as a national messiah, the one who is fighting alone to save the Brazilian people against the national and international establishment. As the centre image in fig. 2 states: “if one man could fight alone for a whole nation, why cannot the whole country fight to help this man against the system”? Besides that, it is significant to notice that this message gives a social and political meaning to the motif of the “personal fight” which appears in the left image of fig. 2, creating a thematic correspondence (Greimas 1989) between the individual pursuit of happiness and a wider collective agency. The last image on the right also reinforces this argument, as well as the deep connection

between politics and religions in the WhatsApp web: “Christians: talk about politics today so that we are not forbidden to talk about Jesus tomorrow”.

As the centre and the right images in fig. 2 also reveal, populist-conspiracy narratives are crucial in this meaning-making process, especially when they overlap with religious arguments. In these tales, global plots, motifs and figures such as the clash between the people and the elites are often used as tools to boost Bolsonaro’s political-religious leadership. To that end, a thick semiotic translation process is developed, which mixes the global and the local through a new combination of expressions and contents. For instance, global conspiracy narratives about the origins of COVID-19 are merged, on WhatsApp, with local political and religious issues. As stated in an audio message that circulated during the first months of the pandemic, the new coronavirus is a plan developed by China’s government with the support of João Doria, the Governor of the state of São Paulo, and other Bolsonaro’s opponents, to take on Brazil and control the Brazilian commodity market. As the message continues, Brazilians must wake up and, in the name of God, join Bolsonaro in his fight against these enemies²⁹.

That said, to what concerns the purposes of this study, it is relevant to highlight the role of the everyday semiotic use and interactions of the messaging app in promoting these kinds of messages, as well as Bolsonaro’s image as a national messiah. Differently from 4chan and other platforms that contributed to the rise of *QAnon* conspiracy theories, WhatsApp is an app mostly used to chat with friends, families, colleagues, that is, people who participate of our everyday life. Bolsonaro WhatsApp public groups, as well as their narratives, are inscribed in such an intimate and ordinary discursive background, in which banal communication and messages are extremely common. Their contents are usually shared with friends and family groups, which, not by chance, are one major channel of misinformation in the whole WhatsApp web, as shown by a research carried on by the *Monitor do Debate Politico no Meio Digital* of the University of São Paulo³⁰.

The outcomes of this social media interactional environment are twofold. First, the banalization and naturalization of

messianic-conspiracy narratives is allowed by their co-existence, in an everyday communicative environment, with good day wishes and other trivial messages. As I said, WhatsApp is not 4chan. It is not a forum where most of the users are anonymous people. It is the app that people use to talk to their mothers, brothers, children, uncles, cousins, close friends, doctors and so on. The semiotic logics that govern its interactions are those of everyday life banal interactions. It is not a game-like experience. It is an everyday phatic-affective kind of engagement (Marrone 2017). As a consequence of such a discursive scenario, conspiracy narratives are mitigated. Alongside the flow of trivialities and self-help messages such as the “Good morning” wish mentioned above, they become normal, ordinary, beginning to be perceived as plausible, possible, reasonable. Moreover, they provide a tool to reinforce the emotional sense of belonging to a collective community. As shown by Anderson and Ventsel (2020: 19), such an “affective communication takes over on social media as people share their impressions about the degree of their sense of feeling disturbed, as well as their emotions and associations via tweets, reactions and other phatic postings [...]”. The affective common core can turn into a basis for creating a more permanent community”. In Bolsonaroist Whatsapp groups things seem to happen in a similar manner.

Second, the combination of everyday banal messages and interactions, conspiracy narratives and religious messianic claims underpins Bolsonaro’s messianic discourse analysed in the previous section. Both narratives seem to be mutually articulated and to reverberate each other. If Bolsonaro displays himself as national messiah, it is also because of the conspiracy-messianic messages that circulate on WhatsApp on a daily basis, and vice-versa. Moreover, standing on the background of this religious discursive plot, Bolsonaro appears as the guardian of the Christian legacy and values before the rise of Globalism, to use Filipe Martins’ words cited above.

The analysis shows that Bolsonaro’s conspiratorial-messianic discourse owes much to role played by WhatsApp in the



Fig. 2. Memes from Bolsonaroist WhatsApp public groups.

Source: <http://www.whatsapp-monitor.dcc.ufmg.br/brazil/index.php>.

Brazilian public debate, as well as to its local uses. In the wake of these preliminary considerations, I shall consider, next, the semiotic relationship between the Bolsonarism and the evangelical discourse, starting from the bond between conspiracy narrative and eschatology.

CONSPIRATORIAL ESCHATOLOGY

Conspiratorial Eschatology is a first feature of Bolsonaro's messianic discourse which is strictly related to that of evangelicism. Fig. 1 above is a significant example of the role played by the "end times" narrative in Bolsonarism. The scenario depicted in the image is apocalyptic: a church surrounded by fire and flames, as in the most classic tales of the Apocalypse. As Bolsonaro's states in his post, such a destruction, as well as the persecution of Christians around the globe, is part of a conspiracy plan by leftist groups.

Devastation, ruin, wreckages and desolation are recurrent themes of Bolsonaro eschatology. Both during the 2018 electoral campaign and his first two years in government (2018-2020) the President of the Brazilian Republic often raised the specter of a moral, social and economic catastrophe on several occasions. According to him, these "end times" would be the consequence of the final "strike" by the "system" and the "occult powers" that have always decided the fate of Brazil, to which the Brazilian and the globalist leftist anti-Christian groups belong to. In May 2020, for instance, Bolsonaro shared on his WhatsApp groups a text in which an anonymous author predicted an incumbent "nuclear explosion" that could lead Brazil to an ultimate "collapse". The unknown writer stated that Brazil was "dysfunctional as it has never been". What stood out on the horizon was "an irreversible institutional break whose consequences are unpredictable. It will be the elimination of Brazil: no more rights for anyone and no money for anything. It is not known how it will be rebuilt. It is not impossible, just look at Argentina and Venezuela"³¹.

Between March and April 2020, when Brazil registered the first exponential increase in COVID-19 cases, the refrain goes on

as usual. On 25 March 2020, following the publication of the decree on the beginning of the quarantine in the state of São Paulo, Bolsonaro posted a video of an interview on his Twitter profile in which he invited the population to rise: “Brazilians! Wake up and face reality [...] if we do not do so, in a few days, and I want to be very clear, in a few days, it may already be too late”.

On 16 April 2020 Bolsonaro claimed to have in his hands a dossier drawn up by secret service bodies that would prove the existence of a plan hatched by the Brazilian Supreme Court, Rodrigo Maia, President of the Brazilian Congress, and João Doria, Governor of the State of Sao Paulo, with the aim of removing him from the presidency. On April 19 he published a video in which the president of the *Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro*, Roberto Jefferson, himself an ally of Bolsonaro, revealed some details of this “plan”. A plan whose realization would quickly lead, according to both of them, to “ruin” and “depression”.

Bolsonarist groups on WhatsApp are filled with similar narratives. Especially during the COVID crises, the apocalyptic narratives about the end of Brazil and the rise of globalist elites become even more frequent. In a similar fashion to the audio message that I have mentioned in the previous section, most of the messages claim that the pandemic is a plan developed by China with the support of Bolsonaro’s local political opponent, and that its implementation would rapidly lead to “chaos”, “violence” and “economic crises”. According to them, China will buy all Brazilian company and industries, supermarket will run out of food and beverages, bandits will plunder the cities³².

Many other examples could be given. However, what is important to highlight is that such an eschatological narrative is constructed in a very similar fashion to that of the most followed Brazilian evangelical church, such as IURD and ADVEC, as well as their religious leader Edir Macedo and Silas Malafia.

It is not my intention, here, neither would it be possible, to develop an in-depth reading of the eschatological dimension of IURD and ADVEC’s evangelical discourse. Building on previous research on religion and communication, as well as in a semiotic analysis of a set of emblematic texts and images from

both narratives, I limit myself to highlighting some crucial correspondences between evangelicalism and the Bolsonarism, especially focusing on how the former contributes to shape the conspiracy discourse of the latter, and vice-versa.

As scholars have pointed out, the eschatology of Brazilian evangelical churches is post-millennial. Postmillennialism is the theory according to which the second coming of Christ will follow the “millennium”, a Golden Age in which the kingdom of Christ will gradually stretch its limits through the preaching of the Gospel. A violent outbreak of evil will immediately follow the millennium, and a terrible conflict against the forces of Evil, led by Satan, will take place. Then Christ will finally return to Earth, bringing the resurrection of all the dead and the final judgment (Rodrigues 2002: 61).

Building on this fundamental eschatological narrative, ADVEC and IURD promote a discourse which praises the so called “Prosperity Theology”, according to which the financial and physical well-being, as well as the consumption of good and services, should be pursued by every Brazilian. As Rodrigues argues, such an eschatological posture legitimizes a consumerist way of life, which is intimately related to the postmillennial apocalyptic perspective: IURD’s post-millennial eschatology fosters a religious and social experience based on a “mundane-capitalist philosophy”, which follows the social, economic and political changes of Brazil. This is also the reason why the evangelical presence in the Brazilian public and political debate has risen in the last decade (Rodrigues 2002: 65; Cunha 2007, 2019).

However, for the purposes of this article, it is relevant to highlight the role played by the evangelical eschatological narrative in promoting an idea of social, political and economic chaos similar to the one of Bolsonaro. Let us have a look, for instance, to Silas Malafaia’s vision of the “end times”. According to the leader of ADVEC, Jesus Christ second coming will occur after the “Millenium” and, above all, a period of “hard times”, “wars, earthquakes and plagues”, “persecution and hate against the people of God”, “negation of the faith”, “false prophets”, to quote the exact words used by Malafaia in one of his sermons³³.

In his blog, Edir Macedo uses very similar words to describe the “signals of the end times”: “noises”, “wars”, “plagues”, “earthquakes”, “hate towards God” and so on³⁴. Alongside that, it is interesting to observe the visual and iconographic dimension of such discourse. To illustrate his narrative, the bishop of the *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*, uses a photo that reminds us of that of Bolsonaro about Christfobia, in which the fire and the flames play a crucial role (fig. 1).

These discourses about the “end of times” echo what we have just observed about Bolsonaro’s conspiratorial eschatology. The motifs and the figures of “chaos”, “ruins” and “destruction” are crucial in both narratives. In this regard, it does not seem a coincidence that, during the first month of the COVID pandemic, Silas Malafaia upheld Bolsonaro’s discourse on chaos. In a video published on YouTube, the pastor stands for the end of social distancing, claiming that this will lead to “social”, “economic” and “political chaos”³⁵.

As a consequence of this, Bolsonaro emerges one more time as a messianic national saviour. His fight against these “forces of destruction” became, literally, a crusade. The left image in fig. 4, which circulated on WhatsApp in early 2019, is an emblematic case of such a rhetorical strategy. Bolsonaro’s slogan “Brazil above everything, God above all” stands below the image of a Christian knight carrying the national flag, while the text above – “Let’s save Brazil” – suggests that the country must be saved from the anti-Christian enemies, carriers of chaos. Bolsonaro himself adopted and corroborated this image making an appearance on the back of a horse in Brasilia, riding towards his supporters (right image in fig. 4)³⁶.

As Bonfim (2020) noticed, the image of the knight is another messianic-millennial eschatological reference, which concerns the role of the messiah as a military leader and also corroborates Bolsonaro’s political-evangelical messianism. From this perspective, Bolsonaro and the Bolsonarist iconography re-sounds the figure of *Dom Sebastião*, king of Portugal, who disappeared in 1578 during the battle of Alcácer Quibir, in Morocco. His disappearance originated the so-called *Sebastianism*, a Portuguese messianic myth according to which the homonymous king would return to save Portugal. Sebastianism also

Sinais dos Tempos

Faça as contas e confira as Palavras do Senhor Jesus...



Fig. 3. *Edir Macedo's post on "End Times"*.

Source: <https://www.universal.org/bispo-macedo/post/sinais-dos-tempos-2>.

played a crucial role in the development of Brazilian messianic and political religious movements (Chacon 1990). As Bonfim (2020: 12) argues, in a similar fashion to Dom Sebastião, who fought the Moors in Morocco to promote the future kingdom of Christ on Earth, the Bolsonaro-knight figure appears as a “king of the end the world”, a sort of a military-religious-mystic guide who fights against the occult anti-Christian powers who aim to take on Brazil and the world.

This analysis reveals that Bolsonaro’s messianism is built upon a glocal process of semiotic translation of expressions and contents (Sedda 2014). Both the global populist motifs of the clash between the people and the elites and the national saviour presented above are framed, here, within a new religious-messianic narrative, in which the themes and figures (Greimas 1989) of the globalist Anti-Christian persecution are mixed

with local political and religious imagery, from Sebastianism to evangelical messianism. As other contemporary populist-conspiracy narratives, Bolsonaro's discourse combines thus the global and the local (Giulianotti, Robertson 2007) in order to build and communicate the idea that Brazil is about to collapse and that a strong reaction against the "establishment" is necessary.

AN AMBIGUOUS MYSTICISM

In his public speeches and social media posts, Bolsonaro frequently quotes the following verse of John's Gospel (8:32): "Then you will know the Truth, and the Truth will set you free"³⁷. Sometimes he quotes the verse out of context, such in tweets like this: "And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free John 8:32. I carry this message always ahead of our mission. Good morning everyone!"³⁸. Other times he uses the quote to refer to specific facts, with the intention of exposing the alleged lies and conspiracy plans settled against him by his opponents. However, on both occasions, the "Truth" to which he refers to is never clear or completely revealed. As an example since he became president, Bolsonaro has kept saying that the 2018 election was a fraud, and that without the conspiracy attempts to take him down, he would have won the race in the first round-vote. However, he has never presented any proof of these accusations³⁹.

Such a rhetorical strategy relies on Umberto Eco's (1990) "hermetic semiosis" presented above, which is, together with vagueness, one of the main features of both contemporary populist and conspiracy narratives. As Eco argues, a hermetic discourse usually "identifies the truth with what is not said, or what is said in an obscure way and must be understood beyond the letters" (Eco 1990: 44). Moreover, according to the logics of hermetic semiosis, "every interrogation of symbols and enigmas never tells the ultimate truth, but only moves the secret elsewhere" (Eco 1990: 47).

This is exactly the case of Bolsonaro's messianic discourse. However, there is another aspect of Bolsonarist narrative that



Fig. 4. Bolsonaro's messianic-knight figure.

Source: Folha de São Paulo.

must be highlighted, which is significantly manifested by the frequent use of John's Gospel verse 8:32. In Bolsonarism, the mixture between hermeticism and vagueness usually gains mystic tones. As an evangelical prophet, Bolsonaro speaks as if he keeps a direct contact with God, from whom he obtained the "Truth". His discourse relies on an anagogic dimension, according to which a given text, to be accepted as "true", must be perceived as a "secret" (Greimas 1984: 108). In Greimas' terms (1984: 108), it could be said that we are faced here with a hermetic-hermeneutic style of communication similar to the parabolic discourse, in which the addresser speaks as an omniscient "Guarantor of the Truth".

As shown by scholars on semiotics, hermeticism and vagueness are main distinctive traits of the mystical discourse (Leone 2014; Ponzio, Galofaro 2019). Both the mystical language and experience could be read in many different ways. As Eco shows in his essay on the "symbolic mode" (Eco 1984), the words and the visions of the mystic-subject are open to a vast range of meanings and interpretations, which will then be filtered according to the power relations in force in a given cultural context.

Bolsonaro's conspiratorial mysticism works in a similar way. What is happening behind the scenes of the national and international politics can be read as a consequence of multiple causes. The "Truth" could be anything. From time to time, the enemy could be Lula, the Brazilian Supreme Court, China and the Globalist anti-Christian elites, or all of them together. What is "true" and what is "false" is decided according to the needs of the moment, always with God's divine seal (Demuru 2020). At the same time, what is true now could be false later. In this regard, it does not seem to be a coincidence that another main feature of Bolsonaro's discourse is the systematic use of self-contradiction⁴⁰. Just as it is not unmeaningful that he often refers to the Truth using the simple future-tense: "then you will know the Truth, and the Truth will set you free". As in the evangelical discourse, the experience of the "Truth" promoted by Bolsonaro's discourse is an eternal promise of freedom and prosperity, something that must keep alive the engagement in the battle against the occult powers who supposedly run the world.



Fig. 5. *Jesus' appearance in Bolsonaro's operation.*

Source: WhatsApp.

The messianic narrative of evangelical churches such as IURD and ADVEC is also built upon mysticism, semantic indeterminacy and the promise of a prosperous future. Let's take, for instance, IURD's messianism, which is, according to Rodrigues (2002: 78), "rich, polysemic [...] has various shapes, faces and functions and allows a vast production of meanings". As the author continues, IURD's "polysemic messianism is capable of undergoing endless (re)adaptations to different realities and socio-historical contexts, in order to meet socio-religious demands from different segments and levels of Brazilian society" (Rodrigues 2002: 162). In a way, it "reflects human complexities, with the intentions of finding religious mechanisms that justify and legitimize the problem solving according to the religious explanations of IURD's Prosperity Theology" (Rodrigues 2002: 124).

Conversely, Brazilian evangelicalism is characterized by a high rate of mysticism and emotional engagement. The mystical-affective experience is a core feature of Brazilian evangelical narratives and practice, embracing different discursive dimensions: verbal and visual language, music, bodily performances and so on (Cunha 2007). This is not contradictory to the mundane principles of “Prosperity Theology”. As Rodrigues observes, Brazilian evangelicalism inscribes the Sacred within a mundane-capitalist perspective, “without giving up mystical beliefs rooted [...] in the dialogue that human beings can establish with the Divine” (Rodrigues 2002: 72).

In this regard, it could be said that Bolsonaro’s mystical claims about the “Truth” seem to owe much to the mystical dimension of Brazilian evangelicalism. However, it must be added that Bolsonaro’s political-evangelical mysticism is not only fostered by verbal language, but also by the everyday circulation of images and memes on WhatsApp and other social media, especially Instagram.

As the other texts that I have mentioned in the previous sections, fig. 5 above suggests that Bolsonaro was saved by the Lord after he was stabbed in the belly during the 2018 campaign rally in Juiz de Fora. The picture underpins both the images of Bolsonaro as a national messiah and a martyr anointed by the Lord, who almost died for his people. This narrative was also corroborated in a video published on YouTube on 4 April 2020, in which Bolsonaro calls on the “army of Christ” (*sic*) to fast for the nation on Palm Sunday. Right after his call, a sentence appears on the screen: “Do not be terrified because of this huge horde, for the battle is not yours. It is God’s”. The video continues with a sequence of statements from the most important Brazilian evangelical leaders, who publicly acknowledge Bolsonaro’s as a political-religious guide. Among them Edir Macedo and Silas Malafaia also appear affirming that “a time of prosperity is coming for Brazil, and all the catastrophic prevision are going to be annihilate by Jesus”⁴¹.

Bolsonaro’s Instagram portraits are also an example of how mysticism is promoted by everyday social media posts, as shown in fig. 6.



Fig. 6. *Bolsonaro's mystic Instagram portraits.*

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/jairmessiasbolsonaro>.

Framing, lights and backgrounds (Greimas 1989) contribute here to build a messianic-mystical aura, especially those of the image at the bottom left, which seem to be an explicit reference to the halo used in Christian iconography to represent a holy saint or a sacred figure. These semiotic choices not only reverberate the transcendent and almost otherworldly dimensions of Bolsonaro's leadership, but also foster the idea that Bolsonaro's fight against the global and local elites and anti-Christian hordes is, above all, "God's battle", as stated in the YouTube video mentioned above.

Such a predilection for religious imagery is a strong feature of Bolsonaro visual image-building. Casually browsing Trump, Orbán or Salvini's social media profiles – whose populist discourse also rely in messianic claims, as we have previously seen – it would appear that this saint-like iconography is roughly absent. This seem to reinforce the hypotheses that the religious dimension of messianism is even more explicit in Bolsonaro's rather than in other right-wing populist leaders' populism.

AESTHESIC LOAD AND CONTAGIOUSNESS

A final aspect of Bolsonaro's messianic populism, which is directly related to religious mysticism, is its *aesthetic* and *ecstatic* dimension. Mysticism spreads by contagion (Ponzo, Galofaro 2019), relying on the sensory engagement of the communication process (Greimas 1987; Landowski 2004, 2005). Fig. 5 and 6 above are significant examples of this strategy. The nature of their meaning is mostly somatic. In Greimas' terms, they intend to provoke a real "aesthetic grasp" (Greimas 1987; Landowski 2004), capturing not only the cognitive attention of the observers, but also their feelings and moods, thus fostering a complete synesthetic experience.

The YouTube video on the Palm Sunday fasting invoked by Bolsonaro is another emblematic case of such a sensory-affective communication, which reminds the evangelical social media aesthetic (Cunha 2007, 2019). The video starts with an epic song, which remains in the background throughout its duration. Bolsonaro's speech, as well as those of the other evangelical political leaders, is characterized by strong emotional tones. Most of them raise their voice to invite their followers to join Bolsonaro in his fight for the Christian legacy.

We are faced here with a high rate of aesthetic load and affective semiosis. Bolsonarism frequently recurs to these particular tools when it comes to communicating its role in the national and international battle against the elites. For instance, on April 24, 2020, in an address to the nation, Bolsonaro's states: "the system will not give up, but we are determined [...]. Powerful people have risen up against me. It is a truth. I am fighting against a system, against the establishment"⁴². His voice picks up. He almost shouts, building an emotional connection with the public by promoting a discourse of suspicion and fear.

Other more explicit examples of Bolsonaro's predilection for mixing conspiracy narrative and aesthetic semiosis are his participation in the demonstrations against the Brazilian Supreme Court and Congress that took place in March 2020. According to protestors, a plan by both Federal Institutions was being developed to take the President down. Going down the ramp of the presidential palace, Bolsonaro goes to meet the

crowd, with whom he takes selfies and exchanges handshakes. As Landowski would argue, he somewhat electrifies the mass, and vice-versa (Landowski 2020: 25). The belief in the alleged conspiracy plots and plans against which they claim to fight is thus built upon a sensory-affective meaning-making, which is spread by contagion, both creating and shaping a collective-community bond (Landowski 2020; Madison, Ventsel 2020; Sedda, Demuru 2018).

The prayer conducted by Magno Malta right after Bolsonaro's election, which I quoted above, shows how the bases of this strategy are intimately rooted in the evangelical discursive and interactional practices. In his speech, Malta announces that "the tentacles of the Left would never have been ripped off without the hand of the Lord and that 'He' anointed Bolsonaro, a true Christian, a patriot full of faith, courage and hope, who will be the president of all". As previously observed, these words foster the messianic image of Bolsonaro, as well as the conviction in the alleged conspiracy plan implemented against him. However, it must be added that the semiotic construction of such a conspiratorial belief does not only rely on verbal language and argumentation. Alongside that, its symbolic efficacy is assured by the aesthetic communion among the participants (Marrone 2001). As shown in the left image of fig. 6, Malta, Bolsonaro and the other people taking place in the ritual are holding their hands. Physical connection and emotional engagement are crucial dimensions of the communication process in which they are involved, in a very similar way to what happens in evangelical cults and ceremonies. Indeed, as Cunha observes (2007: 292), the Brazilian evangelical cults fostered a real "religious revival [...] marked by the release of emotions, corporal expressions and a less liturgical rigor". Bodily performances and the somatic experience are another strategy through which the evangelical faith and the sense of belonging to the evangelical community is built upon. In Landowski's terms (2005), it could be said that both Bolsonaro's populism and Brazilian evangelicalism promote an interaction based on the "aesthetic adjustment" between the participants, which become a pillar of their values and beliefs.



Fig. 7. *The aesthetic and affective bond of Bolsonaro's messianic communication.*

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8hGUtEgwnp6IaHSAg1OQ>; <http://agendacapital.com.br/evangelicos-oram-por-bolsonaro-na-entrada-da-granja-do-torto>.

The right image in fig. 7, which shows a group of evangelical followers of Bolsonaro praying for him in Brasilia in December 2018, also illustrates the crucial role of such a somatic-affective communication in corroborating Bolsonaro's ideology.

Alongside the other features of contemporary global conspiracy and populist narratives, affective semiosis is thus used

by Bolsonarism to build and corroborate a political-messianic discourse which fits in the current Brazilian social and religious context, in which the participation of evangelicals in the public debate, as well as their discursive practices, has considerably risen in the last two decades, gaining space and visibility on mainstream traditional and social media networks (Cunha 2019).

CONCLUSION

The second decade of the twenty-first century was marked by a major revival of populist and conspiracy narratives around the globe. Both are intimately related to one another. Right-wing populist leaders from different countries and continents rely on similar conspiratorial discursive tools to promote their ideology: polarization, vagueness, hermetic and affective semi-osis, among others. On several occasions, they depict themselves – and begin to be perceived – as real saviours of the nation, ready to give their blood in order to protect their people from the elites who supposedly aim to dominate them. Some of these leaders often infuse these conspiracy narratives with religious and messianic motifs and tones. It is the case of Trump, Orbán and Bolsonaro, who have fostered Anti-Christian conspiracy theories such as *QAnon*, *The Great Replacement* or *Globalism*, displaying their political agency as some sort of a Christian crusade.

However, the way in which these global themes and figures are used depends on the reality of a particular local context. In this regard, a semiotic translation process is developed in order to adapt a worldwide populist and conspiracy narrative to the social, cultural and political tendencies in force within a given country. As I have tried to portray in this paper, Bolsonaro's case demonstrates that global populist and conspiracy motifs, such as the clash between the people and the elites and the national saviour, were used to build the image of a messianic leader whose discourse resembled that of the Brazilian evangelicalism. Eschatology, mysticism and aesthetic load are the main features upon which this correspondence is built. The role of



everyday use of social media in this glocal meaning-making process is, as we have seen, also crucial. As we could observe, in Bolsonaroist public WhatsApp groups everyday banalities, populist, conspiracy and religious narratives were mixed in a way that fostered the image of Bolsonaro as a martyr and a political messiah anointed by the Lord, which he himself assumed in his formal and informal social media communications. Comparing to Trumpism and actual US conspiracy theories such as *QAnon*, whose messianic narrative is built upon a combination of evangelical and US conspiracy culture imagery, Bolsonaro and Bolsonaroism seem to stress even more the religious dimension of the Brazilian president leadership. Bolsonaro's claims on Christfobia, his public prayers, the relentless quotes of John's Gospel verses and the saint-like portraits on his Instagram profiles are concrete examples of how he developed a conspiratorial-messianic populism through a semiotic process of translation of global and local expression and contents, discursive practices and everyday social media use.

Worldwide anti-globalist populist forces praise the defense of national sovereignty and their allegedly pure cultural traditions⁴³. They do this by relying on a common set of discursive tools, in which conspiracy theories and religion play a central role. However, every populist movement or leader combine global and local forms of expressions and contents in their very particular manner. Semiotics aims to contribute to glocalization studies, as well as to the scholarship on populism and conspiracy theories, showing how this takes place in practice.

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NOTES

- ¹ <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/qanon-trump-timeline-conspiracy-theorists-1076279>.
- ² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/06/viktor-orban-trumpets-far-right-procreation-anti-immigration-policy>.
- ³ <https://tg24.sky.it/cronaca/2016/05/29/matteo-salvini-migranti-sbarchi-austria>.
- ⁴ <https://catracalivre.com.br/dimenstein/bolsonaro-insinua-que-a-esquerda-com-eteu-atentado-e-pressiona-pf>.
- ⁵ The Sao Paulo Forum is a conference of leftist parties from Latin America founded in 1990 in the city of São Paulo, to which party such as Dilma Rousseff and Lula's Brazilian Worker Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores) belong to: <https://forodesaopaulo.org>.
- ⁶ The concept of *aesthesis*, which stands, in ancient Greek, for sensibility and perception, was introduced in the field of discursive semiotics by Algirdas Julien Greimas (1987) to tackle the role of the senses, as well as polisensoriality and synaesthesia, in the construction of meaning. A theory of aesthesis in social semiotics has been later developed by Eric Landowski (2004; 2005), who has also explored the implications of the aesthetic dimension in contemporary populist discourse (Landowski 2018).
- ⁷ <https://revistapesquisa.fapesp.br/fe-publica>.
- ⁸ <https://thehill.com/policy/national-security/fbi/455770-fbi-memo-warns-qanon-poses-a-potential-terror-threat-report>.
- ⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/QAnon>.
- ¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Replacement.
- ¹¹ <https://religionandpolitics.org/2020/10/22/qanons-messianic-secret>.
- ¹² <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-s-top-what-is-coming/610567>.
- ¹³ <https://theconversation.com/us-capitol-riot-the-myths-behind-the-tattoos-worn-by-qanon-shaman-jake-angeli-152996>.
- ¹⁴ <https://www.thegamer.com/dishonored-capitol-building-antifa-tattoo-washington-outsider-mark>.
- ¹⁵ In this regard, it must be mentioned the parallels between QAnon narrative style – especially that of “Q” – and the bestseller novel “Q” by Luther Blisset, which tells the story of a Vatican secret agent who spread misinformation under the name of “Q” during the Reformation period: <https://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/blank-space-qanon>.
- ¹⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/08/21/i-am-chosen-one-trump-again-plays-messianic-claims-he-embraces-king-israel-title>.
- ¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-47878038>.
- ¹⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/10/us/politics/trump-white-house-coronavirus.html>.
- ¹⁹ https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/03/09/opinion/1520605105_073408.html.
- ²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b42FX5Bb-cU>.
- ²¹ <https://br.reuters.com/article/idBRKCN1OV1RI-OBRDN>.
- ²² <https://revistapesquisa.fapesp.br/fe-publica>.
- ²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BksNm7fDfyg>.
- ²⁴ <https://twitter.com/filgmartin/status/1079342814352293888>.
- ²⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/29/pastor-v-populist-viktor-orban-hungary-faith-faultline>.
- ²⁶ <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/whatsapp-statistics>.
- ²⁷ <https://olhardigital.com.br/2019/12/10/noticias/whatsapp-e-principal-fonte-de-informacao-do-brasileiro>.
- ²⁸ <http://www.whatsapp-monitor.dcc.ufmg.br/brazil/index.php>.



- ²⁹ An analysis of this WhatsApp audio can be found in the following website about COVID-19 misinformation in Brazil: <https://sites.ufpe.br/rpf/2020/05/19/o-efeito-de-verdade-da-fala-passional>.
- ³⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-43797257>.
- ³¹ <https://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,bolsonaro-compartilha-texto-de-autor-desconhecido-que-fala-em-pessoas-para-governar,70002832941>.
- ³² <http://www.whatsapp-monitor.dcc.ufmg.br/brazil>.
- ³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=in3VTR4-cx4>.
- ³⁴ <https://www.universal.org/bispo-macedo/post/sinais-dos-tempos-2>.
- ³⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Zn2dv5FyFI&feature=youtu.be>.
- ³⁶ Such a medieval Christian symbolism is also a feature of the US Alt-Right discourse (Shaw 2019).
- ³⁷ <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1130797095122853888>.
- ³⁸ <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1130797095122853888>.
- ³⁹ <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/03/sem-apresentar-provas-bolsonaro-diz-que-houve-fraude-eleitoral-e-que-foi-eleito-no-1o-turno.shtml>.
- ⁴⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-55107536>.
- ⁴¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MV7vR1ZX19Q&t=7s>.
- ⁴² <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/125379562977764353>.
- ⁴³ See Axford 2020

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