

# Public Universities in Brazil Today: Fake News, Attacks on Autonomy and Bolsonarization

Universidades públicas en Brasil hoy:  
*fake news*, ataques a la autonomía y bolsonarización

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## Abstract

In this article, we seek to analyze the context of public universities in Brazil based on two phenomena: a) the growing wave of attacks, mainly those based on fake news, against the public university, even from the federal government; b) the process of bolsonarization of the public university which reflects a broader phenomenon of adherence to the bolsonarist grammar. Based on the analysis of reports, official pronouncements by Jair Bolsonaro and his education ministers, it can be seen that education has become one of the main fields of dispute in bolsonarist rhetoric to combat «gender ideology» and «cultural Marxism».

## Keywords

Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, university, fake news.

## Resumen

En este artículo, buscamos analizar el contexto de las universidades públicas en Brasil a partir de dos fenómenos: a) la creciente ola de ataques, especialmente aquellos basados en *fake news*, contra la universidad pública, incluso desde el gobierno federal; b) el proceso de bolsonarización de la universidad pública que refleja un fenómeno general de adhesión a la gramática bolsonarista. A partir del análisis de informes, pronunciamientos oficiales de Jair Bolsonaro y sus ministros de educación, se puede apreciar que la educación se ha convertido en uno de los principales campos de disputa en la retórica bolsonarista para combatir la «ideología de género» y el «marxismo cultural».

## Palabras clave

Brasil, Jair Bolsonaro, universidad, *fake news*.

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## 1. Introduction

Unlike in many countries, public universities in Brazil occupy the top of academic quality rankings, both national and international (Santos and Noronha, 2016). This includes federal universities, regulated and financed by the federal government, and state universities, which are maintained and regulated by their respective federative states. In the last decades, however, we have observed an increasing diversification of the offer of higher education in Brazil, marked mainly by greater participation of non-university and private institutions, which today account for most enrollments in Brazilian higher education, 83,8% of the Higher Education Institutions in Brazil, most of them private (93%). (Neves and Martins, 2017).

Within federal universities, there was a significant shift in investment and expansion during the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* — PT (Workers' Party)'s government (2003-2016), especially in the context of the *Programa de Apoio a Planos de Reestruturação e Expansão das Universidades Federais* — REUNI (Support Program for Federal University Restructuring and Expansion Plans) created in 2007. The *Ciência sem Fronteiras* (Science Without Borders) program (2011-2017) was also improved, which through scholarships aimed at stimulating the academic training abroad in exact and natural sciences.

The scenario inaugurated with the government of Michel Temer in the post-impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016 — marked by austerity measures whose one of the most emblematic elements is the *Proposta de Emenda Constitucional* — PEC (Constitutional Amendment Proposal) of Public Expenditures, called by the opposition of *PEC da morte* (PEC of death) — marked the end of a cycle in terms expansion of investments in Brazilian public universities.

In the context of the growing political polarization that Brazil has been experiencing — which has accelerated since the June 2013 protests (Mendonça and Bustamante, 2020) — public universities have become targets of various types of attacks, understood as «spaces of indoctrination,» of «training communists,» in addition to questioning the «return for the taxpayer,» especially in the case of courses in the area of humanities and social sciences. These attacks came from different conservative and liberal movements, like *Escola Sem Partido* (School without Party) founded in 2004, *Movimento Brasil Livre* (Free Brazil Movement) founded in 2014. We should consider that the protests in 2013 had a central role in some political changes in Brazil. According to Miskolci (2021, p. 31):

*The protests that brought crowds onto the streets generated diverse and alternate reactions: from the enthusiasm of some who still associated the people on the streets with demands for democracy and equality to the fear of others who rejected them for the same reasons. But the protests were born one way and were transformed when far-right groups saw in the anti-institutional impulse that agglutinated them the window of opportunity to take control over them, redirecting them towards their goals.<sup>2</sup>*

It is also relevant to affirm that the idea of polarization is very popular in social media in Brazil (specially after these protests), that normally means a polarization and a radicalization between two extremes in the Brazilian politics, represented mainly by Jair Bolsonaro and the PT or just Lula. But in a more empirical level, is not truth the idea that the left wing parties in Brazil have been radicalized, specially the PT

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2 Author's translation from: «Os protestos que atraíram multidões às ruas geraram reações diversas e alternadas: do entusiasmo de alguns que ainda associavam o povo nas ruas com demandas de democracia e igualdade ao temor de outros que os recusavam pelas mesmas razões. Mas os protestos nasceram de uma forma e foram se transformando quando grupos da extrema-direita enxergaram no impulso anti-institucional que os aglutinava a janela de oportunidade para tomar o controle sobre eles, redirecionando-os para seus objetivos.»

that was in power with a strong alliance with conservative leaderships. In the other hand, Jair Bolsonaro has been the president marked by the anti-politics, radicalizing many times in his speech the attacks on the democrats institutions.

With the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 and the wide profusion of fake news, this scenario deepens. Among the four education ministers already appointed by Jair Bolsonaro until then, Abraham Weintraub's figure stands out, who commanded the ministry between April 2019 and June 2020, who was well known for making several statements about public universities without demonstrating sources or justification for this.

In this article, we aim to analyze Brazilian public universities' context under the Jair Bolsonaro government, considering both the president and his ministers' statements on social networks, official communications and statements to the press, and proposals for educational policies that directly affect these institutions. For this paper I have conducted a review of literature focused in recent research on bolsonarism in Brazil and in the debate on post-truth and education.

In this work, we raise two hypotheses that complement each other: a) the attacks on public universities are part of the post-truth context, that will be explained in this article, gaining an institutional dimension in the Bolsonaro government, understanding that this is a space to be undermined and combated; b) there is an ongoing process of «bolsonarization» of universities, marked mainly by adherence to «bolsonarist grammar,» and by an attempt to limit university autonomy.

## 2. Debates and Polarization at the Brazilian University

The university experience in Brazil is relatively recent. The first higher education courses started only at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the arrival of the Portuguese royal family in Brazil, and the first universities are from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Cunha, 2007). However, it was only with the University Reform of 1968, amid the military dictatorship, that the Brazilian university system was consolidated, especially concerning postgraduate studies (Martins, 2018). As already indicated, in the following decades, the expansion and diversification of Brazilian higher education occurred mainly from private non-university institutions. However, research and graduate studies continued to be concentrated in public universities, which remained central in the Brazilian educational system.

One of the hallmarks of the government of the PT was the expansion and internalization of the national education network. As Cardozo and Martins summarize (2020, p. 157):

*The policy of higher-education expansion produced important spatial transformations through regional deconcentration as a result of the increase in funding credit for students in private institutions and the expansion of public institutions. From 2002 to 2014 total enrollment in undergraduate courses in public and private higher-education institutions increased by 86.4 percent, to 6,486,171, and expanded in all regions. The proportions of the Southeast and South were reduced, respectively, from 50.2 to 47.0 percent and from 19.5 to 15.4 percent. The Central-West remained stable at around 9.4 percent, while the North (5.5 to 7.0 percent) and especially the Northeast (15.6 to 21.3 percent) increased their proportions (INEP, 2014). Enrollment growth in federal institutions was 103.8 percent. The participation of institutions located in the interior (outside the capitals of the respective federative units) went from 34.3 percent in 2002 to 49.9 percent in 2014. In*

*federal institutions, the proportions of the Northeast (around 30 percent) and the North (around 13 percent) were higher than in all other institutions.*

For the authors, Lula and Dilma Rousseff's governments can be characterized as limited new developmentalist due to their hybrid character that sought to combine a developmentalist policy of reducing regional inequalities with a macroeconomic policy of neoliberal orientation.

Attention should also be paid to the fact that even educational policies such as *REUNI and the Programa Universidade para Todos* — PROUNI (University for All Program), later used as an example of success by the PT government, have been the target of several criticisms in the academic community in its process of implementation. Bessa Léda and Mancebo (2009), for example, indicate that REUNI in its implementation pointed to a process of precariousness in the university and teaching work, because, among other measures, it would change the coefficient between professors and students; with PROUNI, Catani *et al.*, (2006) affirm that the program maintains the education system in the privatizing tendency of the 1990s, bringing a false notion of democratization, as it would contribute to the maintenance of the existing social stratification. After a few years, the evaluations on these public policies tended to become more positive, as in the work of Paula and Almeida (2020), which indicate that the program resulted in the expansion of vacancies, courses, and enrollment in undergraduate courses, as well as a strong impact on graduate studies, even though this was not the main object of REUNI.

In Brazil's educational policies since the 2000s, the debate about under-representation in higher education and public institutions, particularly of black, poor and students that came from public schools, was highlighted. Although this was not an unknown fact by researchers in the educational field, it is in the early 2000s that the discussion around affirmative actions in Brazil gained visibility not only in the academic field in the strict sense but the public arena in the amplest. As Campos *et al.*, (2013) demonstrate, this debate appeared in the public sphere through the media, presented as a controversial and non-consensual topic. Since the early 2000's, countless Brazilian universities have adopted different types of affirmative actions, considering both affirmative actions of a social character, students graduating from public and low-income schools, and affirmative actions of a racial character aimed at black and indigenous students (Daflon *et al.*, 2013).

The intensification of the debate unfolded in the *Supremo Tribunal Federal* – STF (Supreme Federal Court) judgment on the constitutionality of affirmative actions in universities, which unanimously approved its constitutionality in 2012. In that same year, the so-called *lei de cotas* (quota law) was approved, which guaranteed a reserve of 50% of the vacancies for public school students, taking into account the minimum percentage corresponding to the sum of blacks and indigenous people in the state, according to the latest demographic census of the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* – IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics). For Heringer (2014), there has been a significant advance in the democratization of Brazilian higher education through the expansion of access to higher education by public school students, blacks, and indigenous people over the last decade, and it is still necessary to advance mainly in two points: graduate studies and the job market.

It is important to consider that the advances in these policies are related to a strong debate promoted by social movements in Brazil, especially black movements in the case of affirmative actions (Gomes, 2012). However, attention should be paid to the fact that the PT government sought to create structures

that would consolidate these advances, mainly through the *Secretaria de Políticas de Promoção da Igualdade Racial* – SEPIIR (Secretariat for Policies for the Promotion of Racial Equality)<sup>3</sup>, created in 2003. Thus, it would be possible to affirm that there was a strong identification between the PT government and the implementation of affirmative actions, something that was used recursively in the 2018 elections by both its supporters and opponents, coming to be something directly questioned by the government of Jair Bolsonaro, as we will see more forward.

With this, we want to demonstrate that the reception and evaluation of educational policies during PT's government was not homogeneous, nor was it watertight, with moments of greater polarization and greater consensus in the academic community about them. Especially regarding affirmative actions, there was a very intense debate in different spaces, gaining notoriety in the academy and the media. Despite the impasses yet to be overcome, it would be possible to say that the debate has unfolded in the consolidation of positions favorable to affirmative actions, especially at the undergraduate level, with gradual incorporation of this issue in graduate studies.

### 3. The Public University in the Age of Fake News

The attack on public university is not a new fact, considering that it was at the centre of some of the main debates and movements in Brazilian history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, emphasizing the student movement's performance during the military dictatorship (Freire, 2008). This implied the construction of a representation about the university, especially the public one, as a space of ideological enticement and subversion, which was especially controlled by the *Departamento de Ordem Política e Social* – DOPS (Department of Political and Social Order) during the military period (Magalhães, 1997). However, it is also important to understand that the university has a long history of active participation in Brazil in drafting and evaluating public policies, developing strategic sectors, etc. Even during the military period, there was a significant expansion of the federal educational system at undergraduate and graduate levels (Martins, 2018).

As already indicated, the growth in the supply and diversification of Brazilian higher education has occurred mainly from the private sector; however, from the 2000s onwards, PT began to expand investment in the federal education system, which occurs concurrently also to an expansion of the private sector in the same period. This expansion of public universities in Brazil, as well as the incorporation of other historically excluded strata of society from this space through affirmative actions, implied a repositioning of the university in the public debate, in a double movement of greater recognition of its role and also in a greater contesting the opinions and positions of agents linked to these institutions.

We should also highlight that this scenario has deepened in the context of post-truth<sup>4</sup>, in which academic knowledge becomes deeply questioned (Peters, 2017). At the global level, the election of Donald Trump in the United States, as well as the referendum held in the United Kingdom on the country's permanence in the European Union in 2016, which became known as Brexit, mark relevant episodes on the impact of the post-truth on societies contemporary (Sismondo, 2017). It is also important to high-

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3 This secretariat was extinguished in 2015, being incorporated into the Ministry of Women, Racial Equality and Human Rights, later extinct in 2016. In 2017, under Michel Temer, the Ministry of Human Rights was recreated, transformed into the Ministry of Women, the Family, and Human Rights under the Jair Bolsonaro government.

4 It does not mean that before this period there wasn't fake news or scientific denial, but the post-truth era put these questions in the center of the public sphere. For some politicians as Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump, just to mention two famous examples, it is no even relevant to show some kind of evident to proof their point of view, just the personal convictions seems to be enough to legitimate their positions. And of course, the social medias, the algorithms, the deep fakes, all these elements have contributed to highlight this scenario.

light that in the context of the post-truth, personal experiences and emotions gain prominence over the evidence, which gained notoriety in the face of the strong scientific denialism experienced during the pandemic of COVID-19, which was reinforced by numerous public statements by the Brazilian president (Caponi, 2020).

In Brazil, the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 had as one of its marks the spread of fake news mainly from social networks (Klem *et al.*, 2020). For Cesarino (2019), one of the novelties that Bolsonaro introduced in his 2018 campaign was the introduction of terms that until then were unknown to the national political debate, such as «Gramscian,» «cultural Marxism» and «globalism,» which were featured in the government plan of the candidate, the author interprets these categories as empty signifiers. However, it must be recognized that these terms were already being disseminated through social media by the so-called «new right.»

Of course that some of these concepts as «cultural Marxism», «globalism», «gender ideology» are very common in the right-wing movement in different parts of the world. But in the Brazilian case they have a special connection with some events in the past years. For conservative movements in Brazil the PT and other left-wing parties, as the *Partido Socialismo e Liberdade* – PSOL (Party Socialism and Freedom) has a plan to destroy the traditional family and values, what would be supported by mainstream media as the *Rede Globo* television network<sup>5</sup>. In this plan «Cultural Marxism» would represent a new strategy to «change the society», based not anymore in a revolution, but mostly in «indoctrination» through the media and the educational system.

When his government started, these terms gained special relevance within the ministry of education's scope and the idea of «gender ideology» that was also widely explored during the campaign<sup>6</sup>. An interpretation was consolidated within the Bolsonarism that schools and public universities, constituted one of the main spaces of diffusion of these ideas. Intending to combat «gender ideology» and «cultural Marxism,» the first two names that occupied the ministry of education during the administration of Jair Bolsonaro were direct indications of Olavo de Carvalho, who is considered by many to be the «intellectual guru» of the current government, with which the Bolsonaro family already had ties before reaching the presidency (Messenberg, 2017).

According to Cesarino (2019), «gender ideology» and «cultural Marxism» could be interpreted as empty signifiers, that until the presidential election in 2018 were known only in small groups, but were disseminated through social media. Normally, «gender ideology» refers to the idea that there is an ideology that tries to combat the natural role of men and women in the society, determined by the biological sex, and «cultural Marxism» is a far-right conspiracy theory disseminated by conservative movements that claims that there is a cultural war, in which Marxists theorists based in the Frankfurt School are trying to destroy the Christian values of traditionalist conservatism.

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5 It is important to mention that the *Rede Globo* television has not historical ties with left-wing movements, in fact this network supported the military dictatorship in Brazil and has strong relations with many traditional right-wing politicians as the former presidents José Sarney and Fernando Collor de Melo.

6 «The term gender ideology was coined originally within the Catholic Church in the 1990s as a “response” to the advance of sexual and reproductive rights. This concept has been widely used by conservative religious and secular groups in the public sphere in Brazil and several other countries. Although the category gender is well established in the field of human and social sciences, referring in its genesis to medicine, it has been employed to induce moral panic by conservative movements. While they use the term in a plastic way, without a clear definition of its meaning, the effort is based exclusively on the idea that this gender ideology represents a threat. It is also noteworthy that such movements repeatedly contrast the term gender ideology with a conception based on a perspective that reduces social roles (related to gender and sexuality) to biological sex.» (Oliveira, 2023, p. 2). According to Hamlin (2020) it is also relevant to emphasize that gender ideology is a theoretical concept that was converted in a new term by some conservative movements.

Ricardo Vélez Rodríguez was the first minister of education of the government of Jair Bolsonaro, professor emeritus of the *Escola de Comando e Estado Maior do Exército* (Brazilian Army Command and General Staff School), was in charge of the office between January and April 2019. In his inauguration speech, Rodríguez made the following statements:

*Jair Messias Bolsonaro also paid attention to fathers' broken voice and mothers repressed by the Marxist rhetoric that took over the educational space. The aggressive promotion of gender ideology was added to the attempt to overthrow our most precious homeland traditions. This crazy globalist wave, taking a ride on Gramscian thought and irresponsible sophisticated pragmatism, began to destroy, one by one, the cultural values on which our most precious institutions are based: the family, the church, the school, the state, and the homeland, in a clear attempt to stifle the founding values of our social life. (...) We will vigorously fight against cultural Marxism today present in institutions of basic and higher education. It is a materialist ideology, alien to our most expensive values of patriotism and religious world-view.<sup>7</sup>*

He also indicated that the «liberal-conservative» educational proposals that the ministry of education would present came from Olavo de Carvalho and Antônio Paim's ideas. He also stated that his priority would be basic education, citing the goal of improving the quality of higher education, both public and private.

However, what drew attention within his rhetoric was the insistence on combating «gender ideology», «cultural Marxism», and «globalism», that would be a form to reinforce the patriotism through education. He defended the reintroduction of the school subject *Educação Moral e Cívica* (Moral and Civic Education), created in 1969 by the military dictatorship and which remained in the school curricula until 1993, that was one of the main space to dissemination of the military dictatorship official ideology, based in the idea of nationalism and traditional values. Rodríguez in February 2019, defended that schools should record their students singing the national anthem and, in the end, repeat the slogan of the campaign by Jair Bolsonaro, «Brazil above everything, God above everyone.» In April 2019, he indicated that the history books would undergo a review so that students could have an idea of what was «true» of what their history was, arguing that the 1964 military coup was constitutional, constituting a «democratic regime of power», reinforcing the nostalgia for the military dictatorship that is still present in some conservative movements in Brazil (Kersh, 2020). However, in an interview in which he states that «the Brazilian traveller is a cannibal,» these and other statements led to his exoneration.

The second minister to assume the education office was Abraham Weintraub, a professor at the Federal University of São Paulo, who was in office between April 2019 and June 2020. In his inaugural speech, Weintraub affirmed that he would pacify the ministry of education, which he would respect the different opinions and that he was not a radical because he was open to dialogue. Less than a month after his inauguration as a minister, in an interview with the newspaper *Estado*, Weintraub stated that the ministry of education would cut the funds of universities that were making a «mess,» citing as an example three institutions: University of Brasília (UnB), Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) and Fluminense Federal University (UFF), which would suffer a 30% cut in their budgets, also citing the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF) that would be under analysis. Although the minister cited these universities as cases

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<sup>7</sup> Yoshida (2019).

of «mess», they had improved their positions in Times Higher Education rank, and he could not offer explanations on what made him classify them in this way. For Escobar (2019), the status of science on his agenda under Jair Bolsonaro's government was worrisome from the beginning, considering his ministers' various statements that point to an «alternative view of the facts» that disregards the role of science.

Subsequently, it was announced that the cut would occur in all federal educational institutions, indistinctly, which resulted in the contingency of 30% of these institutions' funding. There was a strong reaction to this action by the Ministry of Education; in more than 200 cities in Brazil, there were protests against cuts in education in May 2019, which is considered the first major demonstration against Jair Bolsonaro. More specifically, Jair Bolsonaro, through his social networks, indicated that the minister of education was studying a way to «decentralize investment» in philosophy and sociology courses, called humanities, under the justification of redirecting investments to the areas of veterinary, engineering, and medicine.

Subsequently, there were still cuts in graduate scholarships, there was a suggestion of charging tuition for graduate students, and an ordinance was published in December 2019 that limited researchers' participation in congresses, forums, and seminars. However, possibly one of his most controversial statements relates to an interview in which he claimed that public universities had marijuana plantations on their campuses, without providing any evidence of this fact<sup>8</sup>.

We understand, therefore, that the government of Jair Bolsonaro, through the administration of Abraham Weintraub institutionalized the attacks on public universities, making public statements aimed at undermining the image of these institutions. In tune with the post-truth context, such statements start from personal impressions or emotional affirmations that are not necessarily based on evidence (McIntyre, 2018). How this post-truth discourse is elaborated, especially in the context of populist governments such as those of Trump and Bolsonaro, makes the ambiguity of the statements part of the game, in which it is impossible to distinguish between irony and sincerity, the mockery and moments of seriousness, the authentic and the false, allowing these agents to easily deny when the situation demands it (Cesarino, 2020). The use of social networks by both Jair Bolsonaro and Weintraub followed the following logic:

*Brazil's far-right overtly used the spread of misinformation and 'fake news' through social media to advance its discourse. For instance, the disgust mobilised and weaponised by Bolsonaro is not limited to the figure of the 'criminal'; it is applied just as vigorously to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community, blacks, indigenous people, and feminists. These fake threats to society have nothing to do with crime or corruption but are powerful emotional drivers —as are the memes circulating on Brazilian WhatsApp groups associating the PT with child abuse, female nudity, and the like. (Chagas-Bastos, 2019, p. 95).*

Weintraub began to lose support within the government itself when a meeting between the ministers of Jair Bolsonaro's government disclosed, in which Weintraub called the STF ministers «vagabonds» and saying that they should be arrested. As one of his last actions as a minister, he revoked a 2016 ordinance that obliged federal universities to develop affirmative policies to include blacks, indigenous people, and

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8 <https://www.jornaldacidadeonline.com.br/noticias/17424/a-soberania-das-universidades-escondeu-plantacoes-extensivas-de-pes-de-maconha-revela-weintraub-veja-o-video>.



people with disabilities in graduate school. This act was later annulled; however, it can also be interpreted as an essay to verify the reaction of public opinion on the subject, as in 2022, the so-called «quota law» will be revised, still under the administration of Jair Bolsonaro.

After Weintraub's departure, Carlos Alberto Decotelli da Silva was appointed as education minister, who was appointed but who did not take office after coming to the public that he had lied on his CV, indicating a doctorate he did not complete at the University of Rosario (Argentina).

Subsequently, Professor Milton Ribeiro, a Protestant pastor of the Presbyterian Church, became minister of education, remaining in office since then. In a recent interview, Milton Ribeiro stated that he was against the «gender» issue, and «as biology would prove that this debate is mistaken», he also indicated that gay and transgender teachers should not influence their students and that the majority of the LG-BTQIA+ population would come from «maladjusted families,» he also affirmed that he read the book by Paulo Freire (1921-1997) *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (Pedagogy of the Oppressed), but that the book only transplants concepts from Marxism to teaching, and that textbooks should be revisited to understand social events in his time, giving us an example the military coup of 1964, which would have had a beneficial effect in preventing Brazil from becoming Cuba (Soares, 2020).

This summary of the Jair Bolsonaro government's education ministers' performance seeks to demonstrate the process of institutionalizing the attack on public universities, considered spaces for the dissemination of «gender ideology» and «cultural Marxism.»

#### 4. The Bolsonarization of the Public University

The second point that we would like to develop is the process of bolsonarization of the Brazilian public universities. We understand that this is an ongoing phenomenon and reflects the political and institutional changes that Brazil has been experiencing, marked mainly by a growing political polarization, with a right shift with the election of Bolsonaro in 2018 (Chagas-Bastos, 2019). It is important to consider that the impact of the chief executive on federal public universities is not a new phenomenon, so it is a matter of analyzing here the unique characteristics of how the government of Jair Bolsonaro has been impacting these institutions, which in our interpretation moves mainly through two actions: a) the direct intervention of Jair Bolsonaro in these institutions, mainly in the case of the appointment of deans; b) the open adherence of some groups of professors to the bolsonarist agenda, fully or partially incorporating bolsonarist grammar as part of the university political game.

Solano (2019) perceives a process of bolsonarization of Brazilian society, which would be a complex and multi-factorial process, which threatens democracy, marked by some main characteristics, such as anti-system rhetoric and the instrumentalization of the aspirations for political renewal, the praise for a messianic justice, anti-partyism, the view of the political opponent as an enemy to be annihilated, anti-intellectualism.

We also understand that bolsonarism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon with a wide grammar that is eventually only partially incorporated by certain agents. Therefore, what we call the Brazilian public university bolsonarization does not imply, at all, a total adherence to the projects that Bolsonaro has presented in the educational field, but that there is an adherence to certain aspects of the bolsonarist discourse and that have been made explicit in the public arena of these institutions. This grammar incor-

porated this logic that Schwarcz (2019) refers to, in which white men, heteronormative middle class, and older start to «charge» for what was «removed» or «subtracted» from the Brazilian citizen, openly demonstrating resistance to any criticism or even diagnosis about inequalities in the educational field, especially in the university structure, still predominantly dominated by this profile of professors.

This is a central idea in this paper because we believe that the bolsonarization of the Brazilian society is new phenomenon that puts together different aspects of the conservative movements in Brazil, and more than that, all these different aspects gravitate around the charismatic figure of Jair Bolsonaro, but at the same time they go beyond his figure.

To be more clear, it is relevant to define what I understand as a bolsonarist grammar. A grammar could be understood as an open but limited tool, that gives resources for the agents to make phrases, texts, dialogues etc. In that sense, the bolsonarist grammar is a political grammar, that can enable the agent to navigate and dialogue in the bolsonarist world, so it is fundamental for a bolsonarist to master this grammar. The basis of this grammar is the division between «us» and «them» in political terms, something fundamental to national populist movements (Estelles, Oliveira, Mata, 2023), defending the conservatives values, something that is often very plastic. In this grammar there is a hierarchy about what can be considered positive or not, so values linked to a progressive agenda that normally is a miscellaneous that include LGBTQIA+ rights, feminism, Marxism etc., is something that belong to «them» and has a negative value, on the other hand, the «defense of the family», meritocracy, liberal State, the army etc, belongs to «us» and is something positive. But is relevant to highlight that this grammar is always in transformation, incorporating new elements and give new meaning to others.

In the Higher education institutions is relevant to explain that the federal public universities in Brazil carry out a public consultation with the academic community, assigning different weights to the different sectors (professors, students, and administrative staff). Each university's superior council draws up a triple list, which contains the three candidates for the most voted dean according to these different weights, as already mentioned. It is the prerogative of the president to nominate one of the candidates on the list, with the most voted being traditionally nominated, which is interpreted as a way of respecting the academic community's will. There have been occasional cases of the nomination of the candidate who did not appear as the most voted, as in 1998, when the former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso appointed José Henrique Vilhena, the least voted on the triple list, to the position of rector of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

During the PT government and that of Michel Temer, the tradition of naming the most voted candidate on the triple list was maintained. Jair Bolsonaro, on the other hand, since starting his mandate in 2019, has intervened more directly in the nomination of 22 federal institutions, considering universities and institutes, either through the nomination of candidates who were in second or third place in the triple lists or through the appointment of pro-tempore rectors. The last case occurred at the Federal University of Campina Grande (UFCG), calling attention to the fact that after the elaboration of the triple list the second place, professor John Kennedy Guedes Rodrigues, produced a video in which he asks President Jair Bolsonaro to be appointed rector, indicating that the university will manage «models of the administration of the Federal Government, with the same indication of honor, respect for the family and ethical principles». In this case, Jair Bolsonaro nominated the third most voted on the triple list, professor Antônio Fernandes Filho.

These rectors have in common the fact that they are closer to the agenda defended by the federal government in the field of education, or, at least, they do not explicitly defend contrary positions. There is also a preference for appointing deans with presence in the evangelical environment, as the Baptist pastor Marcelo Recktenvald, third in the triple list for the rector of the Federal University of the Southern Frontier (UFFS) and appointed rector for that institution. Professor Roque do Nascimento Albuquerque is also an evangelical pastor, and in 2020 he was appointed pro-tempore dean of the University of International Integration of Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (UNILAB). It is important to mention that although Bolsonaro is not overtly evangelical, he has in this segment one of his main electoral and parliamentary bases, through the so-called evangelical bench, having assumed several commitments within a conservative agenda (Almeida, 2019; Burity, 2020). Therefore, it is observed that Jair Bolsonaro has been using a legal prerogative to appoint deans in tune with his political and ideological positions, even though the political legitimacy is contested by the academic community, interpreting these acts as an attempt to limit university autonomy.

According to a report produced by the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI), Jair Bolsonaro has carried out a series of measures that directly attacks academic autonomy, the most striking being those related to deans' appointment. According to the report:

*Bolsonaro has recently enacted a new emergency decree amid the COVID-19 pandemic, excluding the academic community from the nomination process and allowing for pro tempore rectors to be chosen by the federal government. This emergency decree received such strong opposition from academics, civil society organizations, and political parties that the head of Congress resorted to a rarely invoked rule and refused the emergency decree for deliberation in Congress. Bolsonaro revoked the emergency decree on the third day after its enactment. Despite the legal limitations barring Bolsonaro's policy from expanding beyond federal universities, initiatives by municipal or state executives and legislatures could reproduce these changes in higher education institutions under their jurisdiction. A significant move in that direction occurred last year, when the governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro, Wilson Witzel, presented a bill to change the state's procedure for appointing rectors to reflect the federal one. Scholars perceived the bill as a threatening, illegal attempt to expand the governor's powers to interfere in state-level higher education. (GPPI, 2020, p. 16).*

As such, he not only acts directly on federal universities, choosing among the deans of the triple list those with whom he has the greatest ideological affinity, but he has also influenced the state governors to carry out similar actions at the state universities. Although we can point to a series of resistances to these actions, even occupation protests on university campuses against the nominations of the rectors appointed by Bolsonaro, it is interesting to note also that the presence of candidates for rector in the triple list — even when they are the less voted — in tune with Bolsonaro's actions demonstrates the capillarity of his speech.

This adherence to bolsonarist discourse can be better captured through some associations founded from 2019 onwards, such as the *Docentes pela Liberdade* – DPL (Professors for Freedom) and *Professores Livres pelo Brasil* – PROLIVRES (Free Professors for Brazil). DPL displays on its website a photo of its president alongside Jair Bolsonaro on a visit, in addition to a channel for complaints where the following is indicated: «We have a legal body made up of Judges, Prosecutors, Attorneys, Professors and Lawyers

acting in all Brazilian states. If you were persecuted, offended or attacked, for having your positions differently from what the left preaches, come for us, and we will help you.»

It is interesting to note that these associations, although quite recent, have already achieved good traffic with the current government, proof of this is the indication, for example, of Laércio Fidelis Dias, a professor at the São Paulo State University, for the position of director of protection for the Afro-Brazilian heritage. This board is linked to the Palmares Foundation, which in turn is led by Sérgio Camargo, who has already made numerous controversial statements, such as that «real racism would only exist in the United States». Fidelis Dias is the national director of the DPL association, serving as secretary-general.

We should also highlight that even before the Bolsonaro's election some professors at federal universities in Brazil have positioned themselves not exclusively in left-wing ideological spectrum, during the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff some professors wrote public articles supporting her impeachment<sup>9</sup>, a political phenomenal interpreted as a *coup d'état* for some scholars (Souza, 2016).

When analysing the question of Brazilian authoritarianism, Schwarcz (2019) points to the fact that Brazilian society has always been authoritarian since its genesis, but that the social and political processes triggered after the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016 unfolded in a deliberate policy of hate and polarization. These processes start to gain more evidence with the protests of June 2013, as pointed out by other analysts. Schwarcz (2019) calls attention to another issue, as the space of the streets represented a domain of the left until then; however, this spectrum was both expanded and reduced; because, on the one hand, it was expanded to the extent that it accommodated other types of demand, but it was also reduced to the extent that it totally divided the public space so that the two groups never shared the same place. With due reservations, this has also been occurring at the university in its growing political polarization process and increasing and more public adherence to bolsonarism in different degrees.

The alleged «persecution of the left,» which referred by DPL and PROLIVRES, disregards that the left-wing discourse was never hegemonic in Brazilian society. In this sense, the bolsonarization of the Brazilian public university represents the consolidation of the shift to the right experienced by Brazilian society, which starts to find more and more space in a locus historically considered to be resistant to this type of political-ideological positioning.

## 5. Final considerations

In this short work, we tried to analyse some elements to understand the Brazilian public universities context under the administration of Jair Bolsonaro. It would be possible to affirm that the ministry occupies a strategic position in the diffusion and propagation of Bolsonarist ideology, affirming itself in the public sphere that the fight against «gender ideology» and «cultural Marxism» will be carried out, which has been maintained as a speech present in all the ministers who have occupied the office until then. However, all ministers stated that their main concern would be basic education, higher education became the most recurrent target for public statements, and more direct actions, mainly through reducing public funding and the attempt to reduce university autonomy.

It would be possible to state that under the government of Jair Bolsonaro, attacks on the public university are institutionalized since they start to come from both the chief executive and those who occu-

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<sup>9</sup> One example is Dr. Carlos Sell, professor at the Federal University of Santa Catarina <https://www.nscetotal.com.br/noticias/por-que-sou-a-favor-do-impeachment>.

pied the ministry of education. Such attacks are mainly based on the spread of fake news since no data or evidence is presented to substantiate his claims, as in the case where former Minister Weintraub stated that there were marijuana plantations on university campuses.

Finally, it is interesting to realize that a «bolsonarization» of the Brazilian public university is underway (even after Lula's election in 2022), something that is made more explicit in certain aspects, such as the choice of rectors in the triple list based on the greater ideological affinity with the federal government, regardless of the candidate for the position to be the most voted by the academic community, and also in the advent of teaching associations in tune with the speech of Jair Bolsonaro, claiming that there are attacks and indoctrination from the left on public universities. However, we understand that this incorporation of bolsonarist grammar is quite complex and subtle, as it does not necessarily occur in a total and unrestricted way, or even with a direct reference to the current government, an argumentative structure that questions the processes of democratization of access is incorporated to higher education, the most evident case being affirmative actions.

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