



Fundamentalists or pioneers? On the ambivalence of Pentecostal Political Engagement within the Democratic Game

Fundamentalistas ou pioneiros? A ambivalência do engajamento político pentecostal no jogo democrático

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Resumo

Tendo em vista os desafios que o populismo e o engajamento político de motivação religiosa representam às democracias liberais, o presente estudo propõe-se examinar, especificamente, o papel desempenhado por atores pentecostais no conflituoso reordenamento do jogo democrático no Brasil e a nível global. O engajamento pentecostal nas eleições brasileiras de 2018 representou um marco importante nesse respeito, constituindo, assim, o objeto da presente investigação. Dadas a novidade e a natureza de ambos os fenômenos em questão, a saber, o engajamento político pentecostal e a crise da democracia, a análise é conduzida, metodologicamente, a partir de uma perspectiva descritiva, teórica, e não normativa. Para tal, o estudo serve-se da recente obra de Manow acerca da atual crise da democracia com vistas a iluminar o debate a respeito e dialoga com análises acadêmicas do engajamento político pentecostal tanto no Brasil como na Nigéria, onde fenômenos similares podem ser constatados, de modo a por a questão em perspectiva global. O papel desempenhado por atores pentecostais pode ser descrito como ambivalente, na medida em que eles, por um lado, contribuíram enormemente para uma democratização das democracias contemporâneas e, por outro, desempenharam uma função decisiva no abalamento dos fundamentos das democracias liberais.

Palavras-chave: Engajamento político pentecostal. Democracia. Populismo. Fundamentalismo. Guerra espiritual.

Abstract

Considering the challenges posed by populism and religiously motivated political engagement to liberal democracies, the present study sets out to examine, specifically, the role played by Pentecostal actors in the conflictive rearrangement of the democratic game in Brazil and worldwide. The engagement of Pentecostals in Brazil's 2018 general election represented a milestone in that regard and constitutes, thus, the main focus of the present investigation. Given the novelty and nature of both phenomena in question, viz. Pentecostal political engagement and the crisis of democracy, the analysis is carried out, methodologically, from a descriptive, theoretical vantage point, rather than a normative one. To that purpose, the study builds on Manow's recent work on the current crisis of democracy so as to shed new light on this issue and engages with scholarly studies of Pentecostal political engagement in Brazil and Nigeria alike, where similar developments may be observed, thereby placing this predicament in a global perspective. The role played by Pentecostals can best be described as ambivalent, as, on the one hand, they contributed largely to democratizing contemporary democracies and, on the other, they played a significant part in undermining the very foundations of liberal democracies.

Keywords: Pentecostal Political Engagement. Democracy. Populism. Fundamentalism. Spiritual Warfare.

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Introduction

The 2018 general election and, particularly, Jair M. Bolsonaro's victory at the end of a fierce presidential campaign was, and remains, for international political analysts and for Brazilians alike, a great puzzle. It has given rise to a great number of academic studies and to countless public debates on issues such as modern populism, authoritarian majoritarianism, far-right extremism, anti-democratic coalitions, crisis of democracy, and fascism, among others. The most controversial issue, though, concerns the culprit of this new phenomenon in the political arena. Much has been discussed, for example, about the role performed by the Evangelical-Pentecostal segment of the electorate in bringing President Bolsonaro to power (INSTITUTO DATAFOLHA, 2018; DINIZ ALVES, 2018; ALMEIDA, 2019; MARIANO; GERARDI, 2019). Others have called attention to the massive utilization of new technologies in general and social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp in particular (BENKLER; FARIS; ROBERTS, 2018). Yet other voices point out the rise of populism as being one of the root causes of the current crisis of democracy, supported as it is by right-wing, anti-establishment, anti-elitist and exclusionary movements (HARASTA; SINN, 2019). In addition, there is, evidently, a vast array of conspiracy theories circulating through different (online) channels in that regard, which, unfortunately, for obvious reasons, cannot be taken into consideration herein.

Given the recentness of these developments, instant, accurate diagnoses are not a simple thing and caution is much required instead. Accordingly, some scholars have suggested that no consistent analysis is possible as long as the focus is placed on particular, fairly novel issues like the use of technologies, populism or religiously colored politics, and constructed apocalyptic scenarios. Instead, the focus has to be laid “[...] on the structural, [...] on the long-term dynamic between institutions, culture, and technology, not only the disruptive technological moment.” (BENKLER; FARIS; ROBERTS, 2018, p. 384). As obvious as this proposal may sound to the ears of humanities scholars, this is by no means an easy task. As such, the present study concerns much less the new shapes which

contemporary politics and religious movements have taken on than the new relationship between *the religious* and *the political*.

To that purpose, the study will restrict itself to a descriptive, analytical level, as far as that is possible on the basis of the recent literature, while dispensing with a normative approach. The reason for proceeding thus is the underlying conjecture that both the purported crisis of democracy and Pentecostal political engagement appear to be more of a rearrangement of old and new forces struggling for (political) power or a construction of new narratives to legitimate one's own power than a conspiracy against democracy qua form of government. Furthermore, since the coordinates system of a normative approach are precisely those which such new narratives attempt to undermine, an analytical approach seems to be more appropriate so as to lay such strategies bare.

The text consists of three main parts. In the first one, by dealing with common labels conventionally assigned to Pentecostals such as fundamentalists or theocrats, an answer to the question whether Pentecostalism represents *per se* a risk for democracy will be sought. Considering that an adequate answer to that question can only be offered insofar as a proper reading of the supposed crisis of democracy is done, a recent work by the German political science scholar Philip Manow (2020) in which a comprehensive overview of the current debate is offered will aid in shedding new light on what such crisis could consist in and whether Pentecostalism could be a part of the problem. Finally, in order to put these phenomena in a global perspective, a parallel between the Brazilian and the Nigerian contexts will be drawn. For Pentecostals have been directly involved in Nigeria's national as well as local governments since 1999 and there is a number of in-depth studies on these issues available that can be of benefit to studies on Pentecostalism.

1 Pentecostalism as a Threat to Democracy

There may be nearly as many reasons to support the thesis that certain forms of Pentecostalism—such as neo-Pentecostalism—represent a risk for

democracy as there are rationales to refute it. Consequently, two considerations seem to be of fundamental importance for this debate. First, one needs to be mindful of the variety of manifestations emerging from the “Pentecostal movement” to which one, strictly speaking, can only refer to as Pentecostals, that is, in the plural. Second, given that no clear connections between Pentecostalism—in its singular form—and fundamentalism or between Pentecostalism and anti-democratic movements can be easily established, nuanced analysis and sober deliberation are imperative.

1.1 Historical Background

Historically, Pentecostals have been very often directly associated with fundamentalism. This has a long history, which can be traced back to as early as the 1920s and 1930s, right at the inception phase of the Pentecostal movement in the United States—for obvious reasons, the controversial debate around the origins of Pentecostalism has to be bracketed out here. In recent years, however, the label “fundamentalism” has been applied rather in terms of disqualification or even stigmatization of certain (social) groups or opponents than in its historical form, whose origins lie in the 1920s and constitutes, particularly in the USA, an established movement around a set of fixed formulations of faith which they refer to as *fundamentals*.

To be sure, the answer to the question as to whether or not Pentecostals are to be regarded as fundamentalists is a very intricate one and depends, in some measure, on who gives the verdict. Nevertheless, the observations of the American theologian Terry Cross on precisely that question are particularly instructive and may shed some light on this predicament. To start with, he acknowledges that, if one merely considers the binary landscape of the American Protestantism, i. e. the fundamentalist/conservative party on the one side, and the modernist/liberal on the other, one is compelled to assign Pentecostals to the former (CROSS, 2014). However, a differentiated view of the tenets and theology of American fundamentalism is likely to acknowledge significant differences between both, as Cross does. One of the arguments he puts forward is their approach to the

Scripture. Whereas Pentecostals do not believe in the Bible as being the Word of God on the grounds of its inerrancy, as fundamentalists do, but rather on account of both its inspiration by the Holy Spirit and its supernatural nature, fundamentalists tend to view Scripture as an unchanged document revealed by God containing immutable truth formulations (CROSS, 2014). Another feature of fundamentalism which Pentecostals would never subscribe to is their fixation in the past events of revelation or to their denial of any possibility of God intervening in the world or bestowing his gifts (cessationism versus continuationism), thereby remaining profoundly conservative, not only religiously, but also culturally, politically, economically, and so forth (CROSS, 2014).

The plausibility of Cross' arguments notwithstanding, one could rightly object that his differentiation does not really do away with the label of fundamentalism, since their reading of the Scripture and worldview appear to be fundamentally incompatible with the standards of exegetical studies, academic theology, and science in general. But even in that case, the question that arises is whether this label is assigned descriptively or normatively. For, if the latter is the case, applying this label can also be described as a form of exercise of power by means of the established modern scientific framework whose coordinates system is fundamentally secular. Conversely, Pentecostalism is intrinsically subversive in that it uncompromisingly refuses to accept the dictates of secularism or materialism upon religion or even society. More importantly, one of the lucid minds of Pentecostalism points out that, due to the immediacy of its ecstatic experience of the Holy Spirit, Pentecostalism trespasses the limits imposed by modern (Kantian) epistemology as to the possibility of knowing the “thing-in-itself”, thereby dissolving the boundary between the phenomenal and the noumenal (WARIBOKO, 2014). Fundamentalists, in turn, equally resilient to modernism, are not thus to safeguard the supernatural or the spiritual world, as Pentecostals do, but to preserve an early order of things, an *ancien régime*, as seen above, and, most particularly, to experience a certain degree of the clarity, stability, security, and meaning which fundamentalism promises, combined as it always is with a strong sense of identity within a complex world in which one's securities are

constantly kept in check (ARMSTRONG, 2004; RUTHVEN, 2009; CROSS, 2014, p. 386). Furthermore, fundamentalism tends towards reactionary positions, one could say, since all energies are channeled towards the mission of recovering and reestablishing a lost golden age, thus being conservative par excellence. Pentecostalism, by contrast, tends to be future-oriented and highly transformative (MILLER; YAMAMORI, 2007; ANDERSON, 2013; BURGESS, 2020). The social scientists Miller and Yamamori (2007) go even as far as to coin the term “Progressive Pentecostalism” to refer to determined segments and expressions of the Pentecostal movement that are just as concerned with issues like social transformation as they are with evangelism (MILLER; YAMAMORI, 2007). Yet, progressive does not necessarily mean complying with the *status quo* or the established, liberal notion of progressiveness.

Therefore, from a historical vantage point, even if it is safe to affirm that fundamentalists, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals have joined forces to fight a number of early twentieth-century developments such as liberal theologies, modernist mindsets, and the historical-critical method—especially in biblical studies—the motives behind their active and effective engagement appear to be significantly different. The same applies to their joint effort to combat gender issues, secularism, liberalism, and so on in the latter half of the century. As a result, not only are individuals and groups within Pentecostalism to be considered in their particularity, but also the charismatic movement in its entirety, as compared to Evangelicalism and fundamentalism.

Be that as it may, there is another threat which Pentecostals have been often associated with, particularly when democracy is at stake, namely its affinity with or inclination towards a Christian theocracy. Around this term, there is a bunch of other related terms such as supersessionism, expansionism, a Christian nation, etc., which imply a networked, globally articulated plan of power (MARSHALL, 2016; DIAMOND, 1989). Regardless of the controversial dimension of this pursuit—even within Pentecostal movements—, Pentecostals have historically given, and continue to give, good reasons to ascribe them such reconstructionist

contours with theocratic tendencies. The incorporation and diffusion of the so-called “Dominion Theology”—also known as Kingdom (Now) Theology—in charismatic movements from the 1980s onwards, coupled with the notion of “Power Evangelism”, attest to that move within Pentecostalism. This shift has been commonly referred to as “The Third Wave” and took place most particularly under the influence of the works of C. Peter Wagner and John Wimber, despite their resistance to regarding themselves as Pentecostals.¹ Given the vagueness of the terminology used in the literature, the adjectives dominionist, reconstructionist, and restorationist may be construed as synonyms. Additionally, with the idea of the ubiquitousness of evil—i. e. the “powers and principalities” of Satan, to employ the Pauline language typically used by dominionists—, and by restoring the dualist construct good versus evil, Dominion Theology contends that such dark powers can effectively be overcome by warfare prayer and God’s power present in the “true” Church of Christ (HUNT, 2016). Obviously, the borderline between such an approach and one that makes a case for a theocratic Christian state is not sharp enough and therefore raises concerns worldwide.

1.2 A Plan of Power

Whereas the label of fundamentalism does not seem easily applicable to Pentecostalism, the second one, i. e. restorationism, may represent a real risk. Its militant component is certainly a matter of concern as it may condition one’s freedom, which is both a prerequisite for and a core value of democracy. But even more important is their well-coordinated strategy to win elections, coupled with a definite, ambitious plan of power.² Besides the myriad of conspiracy theories that have come about in recent years concerning the relationship between Pentecostalism and politics, including the press coverage of the norm-constrained journalism present in some media ecosystems—as opposed to evidence-based journalism (cf. BENKLER; FARIS; ROBERTS, 2018)—recent studies have provided

¹ See exemplarily Wagner (1996); Wimber (1984).

²For the Brazilian scene, see, exemplarily Macedo; Oliveira (2008); Mafra; Swatowski; Sampaio, (2012); Ramos; Zacarias(2017).

extensive evidence to demonstrate Pentecostal-Evangelical effective strategies towards this goal.

In their analysis of the 2018 Brazilian General Elections, Vital da Cunha and Evangelista point out, for instance, that that campaign can be characterized by a significant change of strategy on the part of Evangelicals/Pentecostals, which, in turn, shows that there is definitely a strategy. Basically, it consisted in a much more moderated confessionalization of politics on both the level of the executive and legislative candidacies (VITAL DA CUNHA; EVANGELISTA, 2019). In effect, this state of affairs confirms the general political tendency in Latin America (PÉREZ GUADALUPE; GRUNDBERGER, 2018). A close parallel to the previous general election may help to shed some light on it. The 2014 presidential election represents, indeed, a landmark in the course of Evangelical-Pentecostal political engagement in Brazil, as they then launched their first Pentecostal confessional candidate for the presidency, namely Pastor Everaldo Pereira, member of both the Social Christian Party and the Assemblies of God. The result was disastrous, as he garnered even less than 1 % of the general votes. In the 2018 campaign they bet everything on alliances with non-confessional candidates, such as Bolsonaro, who ran for the presidency, or João Doria and Wilson Witzel, then running for the government of the federal states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, respectively. The ambiguity of these candidates as to their religious affiliation, allied to their signing up to the moral agenda of Evangelical-Pentecostals was proven to be decisive not only for the victory of the mentioned candidates for the executive, but also for that of Evangelical-Pentecostal candidates running for the federal and state legislatures (cf. DIP; CUNHA, 2018). With this move, Pentecostals dropped their attempt to homogenize and congregate the extremely heterogeneous group of their followers around their own candidates and, instead, began to engage in a tough dispute for public morality and the future of the country.

The second effective strategy of Pentecostals concerns their ability to capitalize on their territorial base. Here, the periphery of Rio de Janeiro, and, more specifically, the Baixada Fluminense region, offers an impressive example.

According to the abovementioned study, the high number of elected candidates whose electoral base was in the Baixada Fluminense mirrors the high percentage of Evangelicals and Pentecostals in that region, which lies above the Brazilian average (INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE GEOGRAFIA E ESTATÍSTICA, 2012; JACOB; HEES; WANIEZ, 2013). For one thing, they invested a lot on the formation and preparation of religious-political leaders in their local bases, rather than on a national level. For another thing, they have effectively channeled—or capillarized, in the language of Oliveira (2017)—their religious and political influence through their church members. In that way, the study concludes that these actors significantly contributed to the “political renovation” of the Rio de Janeiro State Legislative Assembly (ALERJ), as 51 % of its chairs are now occupied by politicians who had never been there before (VITAL DA CUNHA; EVANGELISTA, 2019).

2 When the Common Man Comes to Power

Just a few days after Jair Messias Bolsonaro’s installation as President of the Federative Republic of Brazil, the journalist Eliane Brum (2019) published an article entitled “The average man assumes power” where she addresses a number of issues related to the perceivable changes taking place in Brazilian politics. Her analysis is particularly instructive for the issues in question on at least two counts. Firstly, she observes the disruption of the idea of *exceptionality* as attached to the figure of the president, the highest authority. “Instead of voting for someone regarded as possessing superior qualities which would make him suitable for his office, 58 million Brazilians chose a man like their uncle or cousin (BRUM, 2019).” Secondly, Brum leaves no shadow of a doubt that she does not feel *represented* by a man like Bolsonaro. This count touches on a much wider issue which has been referred to as a crisis of representation and deserves further consideration in the following sections. But, for the most part, what seems to be at stake is the ethos of democratically elected representatives. For the basic idea underlying the concept of modern democracies is that, having become the head of the state, the president—and, extensively, the whole government—leaves his or her partisanship or particularities behind to become a universal subject, as it were, the ruler of every

citizen in his or her country. For Brum, and others, Bolsonaro breaks this pact, thereby sparking off a serious crisis and deepening the already existing polarization in the country. What is more, he seems to represent a movement which is clearly intent on changing the rules of the democratic game and counts on the explicit support of a significant number of Pentecostal actors.

2.1 Democracy in the Making

At this juncture, political science analysis appears to be legitimately needed, as one cannot progress in one's reflection without paying heed to the present political scene worldwide and, at the same time, to the recent developments of democratic systems. To this end, a recent book by the German political science scholar Philip Manow under the suggestive title "(Un-)Democratising Democracy" (translation by the book's publisher) appears to be extremely helpful, insofar as it offers a comprehensive overview of the ongoing debate on the crisis of democracy within his discipline, rather than searching for or heuristically offering solutions.

Basically, he identifies two shifts taking place in the contemporary democratic game, which are reflected in the book's title as well as in the two parts that make it up. On the one hand, he observes a radical *democratization* of democracies in course, which, in turn, generates and feeds the *crisis of representation*; on the other hand, he perceives a critical point in the unfolding of the idea of democracy, while recognizing that it has less to do with the overall idea of democracy than it has with the particular form of liberal democracy (MANOW, 2020). Apparently, both of these vectors are closely related and reinforce each other. Interestingly enough, these two shifts are very much connected to the developments occurring in the Pentecostal political scene, as shortly portrayed above.

2.2 The Rabble Should Not Rule

The crisis of representation was, to a certain degree, predictable and has walked alongside democracy since the very beginning.

Originally representation was the exact contrary of democracy. None ignored this at the time of the French and American revolutions. The Founding Fathers and a number of their French emulators saw in it precisely the means for the elite to exercise power *de facto*, and to do so in the name of the people that representation is obliged to recognize but that could not exercise power without ruining the very principle of government (RANCIÈRE, 2006, p. 53).

Therefore, especially from a theoretical perspective, representative democracy cannot be construed but as an oxymoron (RANCIÈRE, 2006). Conversely, “pure democracy” would fall into anarchy, in its political sense, i. e. absolute freedom and absence of government. Thus, the combination of “pure democracy” and government is hardly feasible, theoretically as well as practically. “The question of democracy is, in the first place, how the people rule without the people ruling.” (MANOW, 2020, p. 36).

The compromise of representation was, at once, an ingenious solution and an effective mechanism on the part of the elites to establish a filter as to who was to be granted access to power and who was to be excluded from it. Since the very beginning, at the dawn of the French and American revolutions, there was a consensus that ordinary, uneducated people, particularly *the rabble*, should be excluded from electoral processes and government offices, mostly for two reasons. First, on account of several ideas that arose from the Enlightenment such as culture, state, nation, citizenship, etc. By means of the distinctions between nation (Nation) and the people (Volk), citizen (Staatsbürger) and the rabble (Pöbel), Kant, for instance, went so far as to even deny the status of citizenship to the rabble. On that account, the rabble has to be educated or civilized so as to become a citizen. Second, the rabble constitutes what cannot be represented on grounds of their vulgarity and unlawful conduct. Since both what they are and what they do may not be publicly represented, that is, endorsed as a nation, they are to be excluded from public life, as it were (MANOW, 2020). As a result, the paradoxes of democracy can be summed up with the ironic as well as sober formulation of the 18th century writer Antoine de Rivarol: “There are two truths that should never be separated in this world: the first is that sovereignty resides in the people, the second is that the people should never exercise it.” (MANOW, 2020, p. 34–35).

Therefore, as long as the political elites succeeded in conveying the idea that representative democracy, i. e. power exercised by a representative minority, is the only or at least the best practicable form of democracy, democratic systems were stable. However, due to the significant increase in opportunities for dialogue and participation, not least because of the internet, and the demands for more inclusion in public decision-making, the system has become unstable and is in crisis. The rise of populism worldwide is, perhaps, the most evident symptom of this trend.

2.3 Populism as a Challenge for Democratic Societies

If the phenomenon of populism is to be methodically analyzed from a descriptive rather than a normative perspective, as this paper intends to do, one is compelled to agree with Manow that populism is by no means the cause of the current crisis of democracy, but merely a visible, prominent manifestation of it. “Populists are not the problem of representative democracy. They only indicate that it has one.” (MANOW, 2020, p. 22–23). If that is the case, one has to ponder carefully over qualifiers like ‘anti-democratic’ or even ‘fascist’. Hence, the distinction made by the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde (2018) seems to be of great relevance for the debate.

It is noteworthy that in the early 20th century, nationalism and socialism mobilised mainly as anti-democratic extremism, whereas at the beginning of the 21st century populists are mainly democratic but anti-liberal. At the very least, this shows that democracy (popular sovereignty and majority rule) is now hegemonic, whereas liberal democracy—which adds key features such as minority rights, rule of law and separation of powers—is not. (MUDDE, 2018).

It goes without saying that populists are anti-institutional, famously anti-establishment, and fierce critics of representative democracy. Not without difficulty, however, especially on a theoretical level, can they be considered “anti-democratic” (MANOW, 2020, p. 17). Rather than stigmatizing populists, thereby denying them the right to take part in public debate, as it seems, modern democracies are being urged to come up with innovative ideas as to how public debate, agenda, and decision-making can be more inclusive and popular.

2.4 Among you, it should not be like this

Unlike a number of populism analysts, the theologian Rudolf von Sinner does not regard all forms of populism, particularly in Latin America, as being exclusively negative. He contends, for instance, that, even from a theological vantage point, the whole discussion about “the people” could be beneficial to theology in general and to Christian churches in particular (SINNER, 2019). With good reasons, he even suggests a linkage between populism and democracy or between Pentecostalism and citizenship³, not minding how precarious the senses of dignity, self-value, and citizenship in Pentecostal environments may be. In effect, albeit being constrained to the religious context, one of the major achievements brought about by the Pentecostal movement was the horizontalization of a number of relations of power. One may think here, for instance, of the de-hierarchization of the clergy-lay people relation or of the de-institutionalization of church structures and bureaucracies or perhaps of their intellectual emancipation, for good or ill, from Western Christian theologies.

Furthermore, they have substantially contributed to what has been referred to as “indigenization” of Christianity (cf. SEPÚLVEDA, 1999; ANDERSON, 2014), a feature that goes much beyond any Western concept of inculturation or the like. Their ability “to go native” was identified as early as in the 1990s as one of the chief reasons for their success in Latin America and elsewhere (MARTIN, 1993). In a sense, indigenization means “pure democratization”, as seen above, since even leadership seems to have been uncoupled from hierarchical or educational requirements, at least on the basis of their theological underpinnings. Such flattening of authority is not entirely unprecedented in the history of Christianity, as it may be compared to movements such as the beginning of monachism or the mendicant movements (Francis of Assis et al.). Yet, the scale which the Pentecostal movement has reached so far worldwide is quite remarkable. Needless to say, this move—i. e. democratization, de-hierarchization, de-institutionalization—brings a whole host of challenges and difficulties in its train, which have to be addressed

³ See also Sinner (2012).

and dealt with. Nevertheless, this is the kind of self-confident empowerment which Pentecostals bear as they engage in politics.

2.5 The State as Visible Expression of Democracy

“Look at the way your state functions and you will see how democratic your country is.” (MANOW, 2020, p. 139–140). This seems to be the maxim with which Manow seems to summarize the second part of his recent book, namely the de-democratization of democracy. Ironically enough, populist groups seem to be challenging democratic institutions *in the name of* democracy (MANOW, 2020). However, contrary to the idea put forward above according to which “pure democracy” would amount to anarchy, i. e. the state of affairs in which each citizen’s autonomy and self-determination are ensured, the current tendencies appear to be leading to “[...] the exercise of power without self-determination, the exercise of power *tout court*—authoritarianism.” (MANOW, 2020, p. 139).

In modern democracies as well as in theories of democracy, the state, alongside its institutions, is the outer, perceivable expression of democracy. It is a place where political differences and rivalries are suspended, temporally, for a greater good. However, as the state is increasingly dissolved due to neoliberal policies, globalization or even to populist measures, this visible form of democracy and national unity seem to fade away. Now, “[i]f the unity of the state is dissolved, one has to reckon with the return of the enemy, with the retransformation of the opponent into foe—and especially, as it seems today, in the figure of those who stand up to this move towards dissolution.” (MANOW, 2020, p. 153). As a result, just as, on the one side, political elites and left-wing partisans may regard populists as anti-democratic fanatics, on the other side, populist groups accuse their dissenters of corrupting democracy. However, Manow contends, any discussion *about* democracy or about who is a democrat and who is not leads us nowhere, as any debate must take place *within* the democratic system (MANOW, 2020).

3 Lord, Deliver Us from the Hand of Our Enemies

3.1 The Return of Prophets to Enthroned Kings

At the latest on 31 October 2018, as the president-elect Jair Bolsonaro was about to deliver his address to the nation, minutes after the official announcement of his victory had been made, Brazilians realized that something substantial had changed in political discourse. For one thing, his speech was filled with religious appeals and motives. More striking, however, was the prayer of the Pentecostal pastor and politician Magno Malta for the new president that immediately preceded Bolsonaro's victory speech. In this short prayer, many features of "Pentecostal political spiritualities" (MARSHALL, 2009) are perceptible and are, therefore, worthy of note. As for its general tenor, an allusion to the anointing of David can certainly be inferred. Malta quotes the Scripture by saying that "all authority is anointed by God". Furthermore, he suggests that only through God's power was it possible both "to rip the tentacles of the Left" in the country and to prevent the president "from being swallowed by death", thereby alluding to a knife attack on the president-elect during his electoral campaign. ⁴ No doubt was left to the nation, on that occasion, that Brazil's president-elect was God's chosen one.

That incipient gesture, symbolic as it was both politically and religiously, experienced an intensification in performance, symbolism, and prominence on 1 September 2019, as President Bolsonaro was literally anointed by the Pentecostal bishop Edir Macedo, the founder of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, on the altar of its sumptuous Temple of Solomon, in São Paulo (cf. SOPRANA, 2019). Historically, the altar has always been a privileged locus for a supernatural legitimation of power and authority—and this is particularly applicable to contemporary Pentecostal politics (cf. OBADARE, 2018; ZWETSCH; TREIN, 2020). Furthermore, this recourse to the supernatural in order to theologically underpin President Bolsonaro's election (in more than one sense) to lead the country may also be construed as a political immunization against their opponents,

⁴ This prayer can be watched at: Rede Gospel de Informação (2018).

as Manow would probably put it (cf. MANOW, 2020, p. 142). For the “man of God” is played off against the men of the world, and questioning God’s authority is never a simple undertaking.

In the first place, though, these two events illustrate quite clearly an outstanding feature of Pentecostal spirituality, namely their intercessory prayer for (their) politicians (YONG, 2017). To be sure, this dimension possesses, undeniably, a unifying character, which is essential not only to religion and politics but also to democracy and to any given society as a whole. Its reverse side, though, is its spiritual warfare dimension, equally inherent to the Pentecostal tenets. The bellicose, violent, agonistic language employed by Pentecostals was not only present in the words of the aforementioned Pentecostal leaders, but was a constant attitude during the 2018 Brazilian electoral campaign. It was evident in the form of the demonization of their political opponents, and thus constitutes another of their unique characteristics worldwide. For “[p]rayer is the weapon of this warfare, and thus the central means of redemptive praxis.” (MARSHALL, 2016). But the Canadian political science scholar Ruth Marshall goes even further in her analysis of spiritual warfare prayer to affirm that “[t]he paradigm of ‘global spiritual warfare’ with its apocalyptic visions, violent language and its obsession with enemies, appears as a particularly polemical instance of Christian supersessionism and expansionism.” (MARSHALL, 2016, p. 94).

To be sure, supersessionism and expansionism are negatively connotated words and it would certainly not be fair to deem them to be the principal driver of all shades of the Pentecostal spectrum. Not only in civil society, particularly in peripheries, are there innumerable examples and initiatives that attest alternative, opposite patterns (MILLER; YAMAMORI, 2007; FERNANDES, 2017), but even in the Brazilian political scene, the most illustrative example being arguably the “*Frente de Evangélicos pelo Estado de Direito*”, the “Evangelical Front for the State of Law” (DIP, 2018). Nonetheless, the question which Marshall is primarily interested in, especially in her major work *Political Spiritualities* (2009), is the relationship between Pentecostalism and power. Two aspects of her analysis are of

relevance for the present study, albeit not being possible to develop them in depth in the following remaining pages. While the one concerns, as it were, Pentecostal's ontological need to be in power, to put it pointedly, the other is about their very ethos of power, i. e. the means employed to assume and exercise power.

3.2 Fighting Ubiquitous Evil in the Name of Jesus

In Marshall's view, Pentecostalism “[...] is part of an explicit strategic program that responds to and engages with the context of epistemological, normative, and ontological insecurity of life in urban postcolonial Nigeria (MARSHALL, 2009, p. 2).” As a matter of fact, African states failed to fulfill the high expectations of the African people for a better life in postcolonial Africa so that a general sense of frustration was clearly identifiable (AFOLAYAN; YACOB-HALISO; FALOLA, 2018, p. 8). For several scholars, Pentecostalism fulfilled, in that context, a crucial societal function, insofar as it was able to “connect with the aspirations of diverse audiences” (PEEL, 2016, p. 97) and to represent, especially for the losers of the system, a real alternative.

Because the gifts of the Spirit might be variably construed in terms of intrinsic or expressive rewards and of external or instrumental ones, Pentecostalism could connect both with the self-improvement techniques of popular psychology and with rituals to exorcise evil spirits that block one's progress. Though “an option for and of the poor” (which still remains a fair characterization of the bulk of its adherents across the world), Pentecostalism has never encouraged class *ressentiment*; but neither has it worked to reconcile the poor to their poverty—rather to empower them within it so that they may move up out of it. So, sidestepping Marxism's strategy of class action, it has facilitated social mobility, initially of individuals but also (especially where adopted by ethnic minorities or in peripheral regions) collective self-enhancement. (PEEL, 2016, p. 97–98).

As some Pentecostal theologies succeeded well in dispensing with the logic of materialistic chains of causality and, instead, placing them in the spiritual realm, the solution to real, concrete problems such as illness, hunger, financial ruin, etc. is to be sought in the beyond. That being the case, Pentecostalism has empowered people—through spirit baptism, discipline and self-mastery, spiritual discernment, spiritual warfare (prayer), etc.—to have a share in God's power over evil and

flourish. According to the Pentecostal theorist Wariboko (2014), the price to be paid in such situations is so high that those techniques offered by Pentecostalism “[...] are approached with the dedication of war; hence, the constant language and practices of spiritual warfare.” (WARIBOKO, 2014, p. 35). Accordingly, their engagement in the public sphere with the aim of overcoming social problems is not to be understood as something additional to real politics, but real politics indeed. For, in Pentecostal understanding, no politics whatsoever can be more efficacious than spiritual warfare. Evidently, such a view of politics clashes with secular views and necessarily triggers a dispute of narratives. Yet, as long as this political spirituality prevails among Pentecostals as their matrix, there are no indications that they are going to distance themselves from the political game.

3.3 Transformation by Means of Performative Speech

As far as the participation of Pentecostals in the political game is concerned, there is not overwhelming evidence as yet to affirm that they do not or are not going to abide by the rules of the democratic game. If that is correct, there is no indication to support the thesis that they represent a threat to democracy. Yet, Marshall calls attention to one aspect of Pentecostal spiritualities that cannot be underestimated, viz. the power of language. The power of the performative speech used by Pentecostals (I bless, anoint, forgive, baptize, cast out, etc.), as compared to constative or predicative utterances, which are typical of scientific or even secular discourses, resides in the fact that it can “literally make and re-make reality” (BROWN, 2006, p. 707). “Spiritual warfare is thus waged through language, through the performative and rhetorical force of speech [...]” (MARSHALL, 2016, p. 105). Rather than evidence-based language, at least as it has been conventionally understood, Pentecostals are inclined to use rhetorical, performative speech to “destroy arguments” and “capture thoughts” (MARSHALL, 2016, p. 104), as they are, according to Paul, nothing but futile human knowledge and reason.⁵

⁵ Cf. 2 Cor 10, 3-6.

The incompatibility of this discourse, informed by a new epistemic logic, with contemporary political and public discourses is apparent. Thus, Pentecostal rhetoric has not only contributed to the current crisis of democracy, but also to the recent epistemic crisis, commonly associated with terms like post-truth or fake news.

3.4 Just Symbolic Politics?

If Pentecostal politics is effective, if it overcomes poverty, inequalities, violence and so forth—or, at least, more successful than, say, secular politics—should not secular forces or political opponents just set apart their ‘intellectual vanity’ and support Pentecostals? To answer this question, a parallel to Nigeria is, once more, instructive, insofar as Pentecostals have been directly involved at the level of national government since 1999.

In several efforts to evaluate this time, the opinions of experts defer from one another to a considerable extent. Among the optimists are Wariboko (2014), from an overall perspective, and Kgatle (2020), especially from an economic point of view (portraying Pentecostals as a successful alternative to neoliberalism). Among the critics are certainly Obadare (2018) and, to a certain degree, Marshall (2009). Marshall’s critique concerns, particularly, the overall Pentecostal religious project. In contrast, by focusing on concrete political aspects of the impact of Pentecostals in Nigerian politics, Obadare’s evaluation is more pessimistic. For him, “[...] the alliance between the Pentecostal elite and the Nigerian ruling class bodes ill, especially insofar as it cements the emergent status of political Christianity as guarantor of the status quo, and Pentecostalism as the purveyor of religious reason in defense of the state.” (OBADARE, 2018, p. 163–164). Throughout the book, Obadare offers countless examples to illustrate how Pentecostal churches have become stages for politicians to advertise and for the theocratic class, as he calls Pentecostal prominent leaders, to theologically undergird the rhetoric as well as the political measures of the government.

On the one hand, even Obadare's critical, extensive study attests that there is no evidence to affirm that Pentecostalism "carries an immutable authoritarian gene" or that it is a priori anti-democratic (OBADARE, 2018). On the other hand, as he sees it, much of that which Pentecostals performed in the past governments was, primarily, symbolic politics, a common term used in political science. As opposed to substantial politics, symbolic politics concentrates its efforts on performative speech and rhetoric strategies. More than about a service provided to the people, it is about a communication strategy, a form of staying permanently in contact with the people (via social media), as populists tend to govern. It is "[...] fundamentally about meaning and identity, rather than about programmatic achievement." (BENKLER; FARIS; ROBERTS, 2018, p. 382). Moreover, Obadare (2018) expresses his concern with such agonistic, symbolically as well as religiously laden rhetoric. He arguably suggests a correlation between the growing radicalization of Muslim movements such as Boko Haram and Christian (identity) politics, coupled with warfare spirituality (OBADARE, 2018).

3.5 Back to Brazil, 2018

A sample of such symbolic politics could be seen, in Brazil, during the 2018 electoral campaign and, partially, in the present administration. Bolsonaro's entire campaign revolved around symbolic topics such as public security, the fight against corruption, prosperity, and the moral agenda (ALMEIDA, 2019; VITAL DA CUNHA; EVANGELISTA, 2019). At the center was the idea of a cultural loss, whose values must now be recovered. This theological idea of a "lost paradise" was, by its turn, ingeniously translated into the political concept of conservatism, which functioned, particularly among the lower strata of the population, as a means of complexity reduction, being sold as the solution to all problems that currently plague Brazil. Accordingly, the causes for the decadence of the state or for the social problems Brazil is facing do not lie in the lack of technical knowledge, analysis competence, or intelligence, but in the lack of values. The issue with (neo-)conservatism is that there are good reasons to contend that the conservative rhetoric has been misused to promote and legitimate—even theologically—racism,

hatred of otherness, prejudices, homophobia, machismo, misogyny, patriarchalism, various sorts of violence, notably state violence among the most vulnerable, and discrimination against minorities, inter alia.

Additionally, the alliances of Pentecostals with the so-called “New Right”, partially also with the American “New Right”, whose prominent figure is Stephen Bannon, helped them to articulate this symbolic discourse and mobilize the population around feelings like indignation, anger, and *ressentiment*⁶. Pentecostal warfare prayer and politics have thus contributed substantially to the deepened polarization during the 2018 general election, and it remains to be seen whether this was or will be beneficial to the country.

Concluding Remarks

The 2018 general election represented a milestone in the development of Evangelical-Pentecostal political engagement in Brazil. They played a crucial role in the so-called indigenization of Christianity, the renewal of both the Federal Congress and the legislative assemblies, and consequently in the *democratization of democracy*. The study showed, moreover, that neither does democracy as such seem to be at risk nor do Pentecostals represent as yet any major danger for democracies. What seems to be at risk is, instead, the Western model of representative, liberal democracy, which has been seriously challenged by populism and Pentecostalism as well. Similarly, just as populism may not be at the root of the present crisis of democracy, but is rather a symptom, the growth and relevance of Pentecostals indicate that Pentecostalism is less a “religious anomaly”, as some defend, than it is a symptom of the global crisis shaking the very foundations of Christianity and Western theologies (VONDEY, 2010). Evidently, this does not amount to endorsing the vision and understanding of some Pentecostal actors about issues like minority rights, rule of law and separation of powers. Rather it is an appeal for a serious debate about democracy and, especially, about *the political* in general.

⁶ For that topic, see esp. Souza (2020).

The very fact that ‘the common people’ are rising to power challenges the whole society and entails numerous conflicts of different orders, particularly in a country such as Brazil where social cleavages are still great and various forms of racism are still daily experienced. Dialogue and inclusion seem therefore to be an essential element of the solution to the current crisis of democracy, and this in all directions of the social ladder. On the contrary, excluding anyone from public debate and the democratic game is conceivable the greatest threat to democratic societies.

One of the major issues that remain open is the efficacy as well as the legitimacy of warfare prayer and spiritual warfare in the public sphere. There are good reasons to argue that, in the long term, the effects of this praxes will be more negative than beneficial to democracy and society in its entirety. Also, it remains to be seen whether Pentecostal, right-wing symbolic politics will prove to be efficient to overcome the real social challenges of many nations and bring about social justice. It is a risky bet, and Pentecostals are decisively playing a pioneering role in this transformative process, however ambivalent their role may be.

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