

The Bolsonaroist Bloc: ethnographic notes on political performances and a parliamentary network in Brazil's Chamber of Deputies

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Abstract

The article presents the first ethnographic notes from a research project on the performances of a group of parliamentarians in the Chamber of Deputies in the 2019-2023 legislature. As a starting point, I highlight a group of elected deputies associated with the universe of Bolsonaroism. The latter is approached as a complex set of elements containing different ideas and whose main political reference is the figure of Jair Bolsonaro, though it also encompasses diverse elements from the so-called Brazilian “new right” and conservatism. I present two episodes to help situate this empirical universe. In the first, I assemble clues and traces from a complaint submitted to the Parliamentary Ethics and Decorum Council in order to analyse the formation of the Bolsonaroist Bloc. The second episode centres on the debate surrounding a law bill on the Commission on Human Rights and Minorities. Setting out from these episodes, I analyse differences between the performances of Bolsonaroist deputies and the parliamentary behaviour prevailing in the National Congress. I conclude the article by pointing to some analytical paths for the future development of this investigation.

Keywords: Anthropology of Politics, Anthropology of Parliament, Parliament, Bolsonaroism, Political Bloc.

Bancada bolsonarista: notas etnográficas de performances políticas e uma rede parlamentar na Câmara dos deputados

Resumo

O artigo apresenta as primeiras notas etnográficas de uma pesquisa sobre as performances de um conjunto de parlamentares na Câmara dos Deputados na legislatura 2019-2023. Como ponto de partida, destaco um grupo de deputados eleitos associados ao universo do Bolsonarismo, considerando esse último um conjunto complexo que abriga diferentes ideias e que tem como principal referencial político a figura de Jair Bolsonaro, comportando também elementos diversificados da chamada “nova direita” brasileira e do conservadorismo. Apresento dois episódios para situar o universo empírico. No primeiro, organizo pistas e rastros a partir de uma representação submetida ao Conselho de Ética e Decoro Parlamentar para analisar a formação do grupo bolsonarista. O segundo episódio tem como elemento central o debate de um projeto de lei na Comissão de Direitos Humanos e Minorias. A partir deles, analiso diferenças entre as performances dos deputados bolsonaristas e o comportamento parlamentar predominante no Congresso Nacional. Finalizo o artigo apontando alguns caminhos analíticos para os desdobramentos dessa investigação.

Palavras-chave: Antropologia da Política, Antropologia do Parlamento, Parlamento, Bolsonarismo, Bancada.

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Introduction

The victory of Jair Messias Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections represented more than his own rise to the highest office in Brazil's federal republic. It also demonstrated the regional diffusion and consolidation of a far right electorate. Swept along by the phenomenon of Bolsonaroism – which has become a topic of some intrigue for Brazil's social sciences – representatives of this political upsurge were elected to the federal houses and state legislatures across the country. In the Chamber of Deputies alone, the Social Liberal Party (PSL),¹ on whose ticket Bolsonaro ran as a presidential candidate in 2018, went from holding one seat in the preceding term to 52 seats in the ballot for the 56th legislature.

In this groundswell, rather than presenting a centralized set of programs for government, the 'Bolsonarist wave' manifested an anti-party and anti-system political tendency (Solano, 2019). Voicing a political desire to annihilate the left, confront progressivists and reject conventional democratic politics, it won over an electorate that secured mandates for names until then unknown in the national political setting and received high numbers of votes in 2018, including the election of Eduardo Bolsonaro with 1.8 million votes, consolidating Bolsonaroism as a powerful electoral force. In 2022, this potential was reaffirmed with the Liberal Party, now the new party ticket of Jair Messias Bolsonaro, which won the largest number of seats in the Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate.²

Since 2018, a series of studies of the Bolsonaroism phenomenon in Brazilian politics has emerged as part of an urgent and wide-ranging attempt to understand the multiple facets of this populist far-right movement, its specificities and vicissitudes.³ As a complex and fluid phenomenon, Bolsonaroism can be understood as “a sociotechnical dynamic of continuous and performative mobilization” (Cesarino, 2022), linked to a set of emergent agendas and featuring a diverse array of actors, ranging from politicians to digital profiles, artists, YouTube channels, TV channels, activists, military personnel, lawyers, journalists and/or digital influencers.

¹ The Social Liberal Party was a Brazilian political party that merged with the Democrats to form the Brazil Union (*União Brasil*), a merger recognized on 8 February 2022 by Brazil's Supreme Electoral Court.

² It is worth emphasizing that, unlike the PSL, the PL was already a well-established political party in Brazil before Jair Bolsonaro's affiliation and via which he would receive many of his allies. The impact of his affiliation on the party's growth is unquestionable, but the achievement of winning so many seats in the 2022 elections resulted from a combination of both forces.

³ Various works have been published recently on this topic. Since they make the same use of ethnography or qualitative methods in their empirical research as my own inquiry, I highlight the works of Leticia Cesarino (Cesarino 2020, 2022), Camila Rocha (Rocha, 2018; Rocha & Medeiros, 2021) and Isabela Kalil (Kalil, 2018).

Situated within this universe with its huge diversity of manifestations and actors, I am developing a doctoral research project focused on the presence of Bolsonarism in the Chamber of Deputies, more specifically a group of 34 federal deputies elected in 2018 who form what has become known as the Bolsonarist Bloc (*Bancada Bolsonarista*). At its broadest level, the research investigates how this grouping acts in parliament and interacts with the institution and its set of rules. A set of rules that, given the dynamic of the legislative chamber itself, is simultaneously consolidated and constantly placed in tension. The present text is the first publication deriving from this research.

In this article I present the first notes from an ethnography of performance of this set of lawmakers in the Chamber of Deputies in the 2019-2023 legislature. As a starting point, I foreground the group of elected deputies who operate and are associated with the universe of Bolsonarism. Participant observation began in exploratory fashion at the start of the 56th legislature with in-person monitoring of meetings, sessions and events at the National Congress. After delineating the group of parliamentarians who would feature centrally in the research, the Bolsonarist Bloc, the ethnography intensified and began to consider the agendas and spaces that mobilized the group's activities. Commission meetings, public events and plenary sessions assumed a key place in the research as settings for the political performances and clashes. Although the observation is more extensive, here I have opted to analyse two *social situations* (Gluckman, 1987) where I deploy everything I learnt in the field in order to interpret these events. The specific period during which the two episodes occurred was prior to the interruption of my in-person research following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. After this time, the Chamber of Deputies website and the transmission of its meetings and sessions on YouTube, previously auxiliary resources to review and reinforce what I had observed in person, acquired a much more significant role in the construction of my data.

The two situations and their controversies are used to situate the empirical universe of my analysis. In the first case, I assemble clues and traces based on a complaint submitted to the Parliamentary Ethics and Decorum Council of the Chamber of Deputies in order to analyse how the Bolsonarist group coalesced. Its formation can be observed primarily through the controversies. The setting for the second situation is the clash over a law bill on the Commission on Human Rights and Minorities. Through this case, I analyse differences between the performances of the Bolsonarist deputies and the parliamentary behaviour predominant in the National Congress. Next, I indicate some analytic paths for the future development of this investigation and the research agenda.

The attempt to understand this political grouping is later taken up in a discussion of the empirical and analytic challenges presented by the study of thematic blocs for investigations in diverse parliaments.

In the second part of the article, I explore the episode from the Commission on Human Rights and Minorities. As well as presenting the performance of different deputies, I include an analysis of social network posts and publications, chosen because they echoed the controversy or were mentioned by subjects during the event in question, thus making them relevant to reconstructing its wider setting.

Bolsonarism makes its presence felt in diverse spaces and utilizes different strategies to sustain itself and keep its base engaged, amplifying its influence on Brazilian politics in the process. The Chamber of Deputies was an important space of visibility in Jair Bolsonaro's 27-year career as a parliamentarian: comprehending the action of this political phenomenon in the institutional spaces of doing politics is thus one of the interests guiding this investigative enterprise.

THE CONTROVERSIES: on the formation of the parliamentary collective

We – deputies of the PSL, Laterça, Colonel Chrisóstomo, Jordy, Aline, Silva – belong to the outraged who until yesterday had no space here. Until yesterday, it was Pastor Marco Feliciano, Jair Bolsonaro, one or two from the Evangelical Bloc. Now you're all going have to put up with us! There's no use chanting slogans and saying that you present women because we've broken your hegemony. And here nobody bends over for the politically correct, no way. We're going to continue speaking, fine by you? (Chamber of Deputies, 2020)

4 March 2020. Ethics and Parliamentary Decorum Council of the Chamber of Deputies. Reading of the preliminary report of Deputy Eduardo Costa (PTB)⁴ referring to Complaint n. 12 of 2019, submitted by the Social Liberal Party (PSL), against Deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro (affiliated at the time to the PSL, currently linked to the Liberal Party (PL)) and formulated by Deputy Joyce Hasselmann (at the time PSL; today Brazil Union). The complaint is read by the rapporteur: over its seven pages are set out the *fatos* (facts) against the deputy. The document is based on the texts of the Federal Constitution (Article 55), the Internal Regulations of the Chamber of Deputies – RICD (Articles 240 and 244) and the Code of Ethics and Parliamentary Decorum of the Chamber of Deputies (Article 5).

Briefly, the conflict emerged from a dispute over the post of leader of the PSL, a position occupied in the first year of the 2019-2023 legislature by the deputy Police Chief Waldir. According to the complaint, the President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro, was keen to see Deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro, his son, assume the post of party leader. Opposing this move, Deputy Joyce Hasselmann – then leader of the government in the Chamber – publicly declared her support for Police Chief Waldir to remain as leader of the PSL. The complaint alleges that the parliamentarian Joyce Hasselmann was removed from the post of government leader – a position that, according to the document, she had performed with “diligence and dedication” – as part of the government’s retaliation.

Figure 1: Collage of fake banknote with Joyce Hasselmann’s face



Also according to the complaint, as part of the same series of reprisals, Deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro had incited a “virtual lynching” of the congresswoman, the most striking symbol of this attack being the publication of a collage with Joyce Hasselmann’s face emblazoned on an obviously fake three reais banknote (a non-existent denomination). The document relates the construction of a “defamatory and libellous” campaign and the orchestration of an “odious chain reaction” against the “objective and subjective honour” of the congresswoman. The complaint concluded with the formal request to launch a disciplinary procedure that would see Eduardo Bolsonaro disqualified from office.

⁴ Brazilian Labour Party (*Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro*).

The honour in question centres around two aspects: first, the honour of the person, on which the defence of Deputy Joice Hasselmann is based; second, the honour of the collective, where we need to consider that “dishonourable contact is not limited to the individual who committed it but compromises the entire collective to which this individual belongs,” a political process being capable here of elucidating the “boundaries and conditions of political belonging” (Teixeira, 1998: 44) updated over time. Hence, the discussion of any complaint examined by the Ethics and Parliamentary Decorum Council also refers to an idea, here under dispute, about the type of conduct that parliamentarians should ideally manifest.

As a result of this complaint, Deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro, in just his second mandate, became the parliamentarian with the highest number of complaints referred to the Ethics Council, surpassing even his father, the former deputy and then current President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro.

It was not only Deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro who was subject to a complaint launched by his own party. Carla Zambelli, Carlos Jordy, Filipe Barros, Daniel Silveira, Alê Silva and Bibó Nunes were also subject to complaints submitted on 11 November 2019, in the same context of internal tensions within the PSL and related to the name of the President, Jair Bolsonaro, elected by the Social Liberal Party but who spent a period of 24 months without any party affiliation.⁵ Jair Bolsonaro’s exit from the PSL was followed by the announcement of the plan to create the Alliance for Brazil (*Aliança Pelo Brasil*), a new party that was projected around the name of the head of the executive and sought to be eligible to compete in the 2020 municipal elections. On 7 December 2019, 26 federal deputies from the PSL⁶ filed a request for disaffiliation from the party, alleging internal political persecution. However, the requirement to obtain 500,000 signatures was an obstacle to the creation of the new party.

Controversies like these, involving lawmakers affiliated to the PSL, provide important clues for understanding the emergence and formation of a network of deputies, an action set, that I provisionally call the ‘Bolsonarist Bloc.’

Concerning the set of complaints made against this group of deputies, it is worth emphasizing that the overwhelming majority of the facts related in the documents refer to actions in the virtual domain, involving the profiles of the deputies, propagated on social networks and via instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram. The complaint against Deputy Daniel Silveira is the exception: he was accused of recording a meeting of the PSL leadership without the consent of those present and then releasing it to the press.⁷

The Social Liberal Party was the standout success of the 2018 elections when it elected 52 deputies. The party obtained the largest growth in the Chamber of Deputies compared to the preceding 2015-2019 legislature, when it elected just one parliamentarian.

5 His disaffiliation from the PSL was announced on 12 November 2019. On 30 November, he joined the Liberal Party.

6 The deputies who filed a request for justified disaffiliation and continuance in office were Bibó Nunes (RS); Alê Silva (MG); Aline Sleutjes (PR); Bia Kicis (DF); Carla Zambelli (SP); Carlos Jordy (RJ); Caroline de Toni (SC); Chris Tonietto (RJ); Daniel Freitas (SC); Daniel Silveira (RJ); Eduardo Bolsonaro (SP); General Girão (RN); Filipe Barros (PSL); Junio Amaral (MG); Luiz Philippe de Orleans e Bragança (SP); Luiz Lima (RJ); Luiz Ovando (MS); Léo Motta (MG); Helio Lopes (RJ); Colonel Chrisóstomo (RO); Guiga Peixoto (SP); Márcio Labre (RJ); Colonel Armando (SC); Sanderson (RS); Major Fabiana (RJ) and Major Vitor Hugo (GO). After the affiliation of Jair Bolsonaro to the Liberal Party, the vast majority of the Bolsonaroist deputies migrated to the PL in the 2022 ‘party window’ (a 30-day period when lawmakers can change party without losing their mandate, occurring six months before elections).

7 After publication of a video on YouTube containing attacks on ministers from the Supreme Federal Court (STF) and a series of manifestations against democratic institutions, Deputy Daniel Silveira assumed a leading role in a major public campaign against Brazil’s highest court. The Ethics Council of the Chamber of Deputies is currently processing nine complaints against the deputy, who is presently ignoring a judicial order to use an electronic ankle tag as part of a sentence restricting his movements decreed by the STF.

Figure 2: Post on the Instagram profile of Deputy Daniel Silveira



Though the party with the second highest number of lawmakers in the Chamber of Deputies, the PSL is fragmented by internal tensions, the most visible related to Bolsonaro himself. According to declarations by party cohorts in posts shared on their social networks and in YouTube live streams, there exist two main poles in the split: the first group was led by Eduardo Bolsonaro; the second was concentrated around the figure of the party president, Deputy Luciano Bivar (PSL/PE). While in a multiparty setting with 24 separate parties represented in the Chamber of Deputies, the party structure already experienced limitations and difficulties in organizing legislative work, especially in relation to voting procedures (Araújo & Silva, 2016), the bloc formed by the Social Liberal Party,⁸ already in the first year of the legislature, confronted a major split that affected its internal cohesion and generated problems in terms of party loyalty. This fragmentation increased the visibility of what would become the collective at the centre of this article: the Bolsonaro Bloc.

The Portuguese word *bancada* – translated here as bloc – is a polysemic term denominating diverse types of groupings, whether in discussions involving parliaments among political analysts from journalism or academia, or in its use as a native category. The term bloc (*bancada*) can refer to: (i) groupings officially classified in the Chamber’s internal regulations: parties, coalitions, government, opposition, majority and minority; (ii) the set of deputies elected by a particular federal state or the federal district; and (iii) groups of parliamentarians who mobilize around similar agendas. The Bolsonaro Bloc is an example of this latter type, an informal bloc (DIAP, 2018) or a cross-party thematic bloc⁹ (Araújo & Silva, 2016).

At the beginning of this legislature, the denomination linked to the name of Jair Bolsonaro was present in content published by the press and in parliamentary speeches, as the category classifying the set of deputies affiliated to the PSL. Over the course of the year, the term ‘Bolsonarist’ became increasingly centred on a specific group, spotlighted following the split in the party, and whose name was linked to the president of

8 The merger of the Social Liberal Party and the Democrats was approved by the Supreme Electoral Court (*Tribunal Superior Eleitoral*: TSE) in 2022, forming the Brazil Union (*União Brasil*). After this process, the new party became the largest in the Chamber of Deputies until the mass exodus during the “party window” when the Bolsonaroist deputies migrated to the PL.

9 Equivalent denominations can be found in the specialized international literature under general terms such as legislative member organization (LMO). More specifically, the United States Congress uses the terms caucuses and congressional member organizations, while in studies of the European Parliament, the term intergroups is commonplace (Ringe, Victor & Carman, 2013).

the republic. This change was a response to a series of crises and clashes, which influenced the behaviour of parliamentarians and changed how they were classified. This series of controversies would make the formation of this collective readily visible.

Contrary to a strategy that aims to identify convergences, consensus and similarities in order to understand an association, here I focus my attention on the contradictions and disputed elements to comprehend the formation of this collective. The strategy becomes one of seeking out the movements and traces left in the formation of this grouping to understand its existence and how it operates. Every crisis, dispute over meaning, manifestation, dilemma, innovation, document produced, YouTube video or meme shared on social networks becomes a potential component or mechanism in the identification and fabrication of the group. A trace to be followed:

Group formations leave many more traces in their wake than already established connections which, by definition, might remain mute and invisible. (...) ... every time a new grouping is alluded to the fabrication mechanism necessary to keep it alive will be made visible and thus traceable (Latour, 2012: 31).

Hence, the clues and traces left by the formation of this group can be sought in events, in the discourses of the subjects, and in the tangible and intangible productions over the period of the legislature. I use the term 'Bolsonarist' provisionally but from the very beginning of the legislature it was possible to observe two things. First, a group of deputies, mostly affiliated to the PSL, engaged in their parliamentary performance in a joint and coordinated fashion, forming a block in constant defence of the Bolsonaro government and around a common agenda composed by a set of issues linked to Bolsonaroism:¹⁰ advocating a relaxation of firearm controls, anticommunism, punitive sentencing, combatting "gender ideology," defence of the "traditional Brazilian family," culture wars, anti-feminism, anti-PT (the Workers' Party) and an anti-system emulation, among other issues fronted by Jair Bolsonaro. Second, this terminology also began to be employed by other politicians as an accusatory category and also by the media, including application of the label 'Bolsonarist' to a broader set of parliamentarians extending beyond the Chamber of Deputies.¹¹

As well as the group of deputies who requested disaffiliation from the PSL, this bloc also includes some members of other political parties. The construction of this list of members has involved the observation of the performances and associations of these parliamentarians on commissions, in the plenary session and on the Twitter social network by accompanying their profiles.

The parliamentarians are: Aline Sletjtes, Bia Kicis, Carlos Jordy, Caroline de Toni, Chris Tonietto, Colonel Chrisóstomo, Daniel Freitas, Eduardo Bolsonaro, Filipe Barros, Léo Motta, Luiz Lima, Luiz Ovando, Luiz Philippe de Orleans e Bragança, Major Fabiana, Major Vitor Hugo, Márcio Labre, Alê Silva, Bibó Nunes, Carla Zambelli, Colonel Armando, Daniel Silveira, General Girão, Guiga Peixoto, Helio Lopes, Junio Amaral, Sanderson, Police Chief Éder Mauro, Sergeant Fatur, Otoni de Paula, Kátia Sastre, Guilherme Derrite, Colonel Tadeu and Nelson Barbudo.

¹⁰ Various terms are employed by parliamentarians, the media and social scientists to refer to this network of professional politicians, such as the new right, the conservative right or simply conservatives. It is worth emphasizing that these other terminologies tend to be used for a broader spectrum of actors; hence, I have opted to utilize the terms Bolsonaroism and Bolsonaroist to make clearer the network observed here. I highlight two recent doctoral theses in political science that focus on this broader group on the right of the political spectrum: the thesis by Marina Bassos Lacerda, "Neoliberalism on the periphery: familist, primitive and neoliberal articulation in the Chamber of Deputies" (2018) and the thesis by Camila Rocha (2018), "Less Marx, more Mises: agnesis of the Brazilian new right (2006-2018)", both in Portuguese.

¹¹ Since 2019, the term Bolsonaroist Bloc (*Bancada Bolsonaroista*) has been widely used by the media to denominate the group of deputies, normally from the PSL, in the legislative assemblies of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, which became consolidated as opposition blocs to the governments of Wilson Witzel (PSC) and João Dória (PSDB) respectively. Both the latter were elected as allies of Jair Bolsonaro, but during the first year of their governments they adopted an antagonistic stance to the then President of the Republic. This tension increased in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Among these 34 deputies, just Eduardo Bolsonaro and Police Chief Eder Mauro had held a mandate previously in the Chamber of Deputies, both elected to the 2015-2019 legislature. A total of 23 of this group were elected to a public post for the first time in 2018. Earlier, still under the influence of the institutional rupture generated by the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, three were elected to municipal legislatures in 2016: Carlos Jordy (Niterói/RJ), Filipe Barros (Londrina/PR) and Otoni de Paula (Rio de Janeiro/RJ). These three already stood out by their adoption of a set of issues championed by a more radical sector of the right. In their performances, they had also already adopted a more belligerent approach, very similar to what they would act out as a collective in the National Congress.

As well as a common set of issues, this group shares a confrontational performance based on a behavioural repertoire that, as hypothesized in this investigation, is being produced and consolidated in the current 2019-2023 legislature. Initially, the performance in the plenary session, on the commission and on social networks is what most calls attention as the element common to this group. Accompanying the National Congress in the current legislature, it was possible to note which agendas and kinds of events allow the group's movement to be identified and the paths along which they usually leave their traces.

While in his 27 years as a federal deputy Jair Bolsonaro was seen as an isolated figure, an outsider with no clearly defined links to any group or bloc, this group, for its part, very much shares an agenda, a style of doing politics, and is consolidating both a discourse and a collective performance. But although dynamic, this repertoire lacks any kind of coherence between its practitioners for them to be readily identifiable as a group. As emphasized earlier, this constant formation and transformation is part of the nature of groupings. The controversies that might otherwise hinder the identification of the group, contrary to what might be imagined, help shed light on the characteristics of the collective under study and its associations.

THE BATTLEFIELD: the parliamentary performance

20 August 2019. After mobilizing a network of acquaintances, I obtained the contact of an employee from the Chamber of Deputies who, two years earlier, had completed her doctoral thesis on the legislative production of groups of neo-conservative deputies. She greeted me in her office and explained the current configuration of the Commission for Human Rights and Minorities (CDHM), which, she suggested, was an ideal venue to observe the activities of conservative groups in the Brazilian parliament. Unlike previous legislatures, the left-wing parties have currently lost majority control on the commission and although the Workers' Party (PT) still chairs the board, they no longer enjoy any advantage in the composition of the plenary. Due to her official position in the Chamber of Deputies, she apologized and advised me right away that she would be unable to mediate in any capacity. She could pass me some contacts, however. At this first meeting, I was told that the CDHM was being targeted by groups of conservative deputies and that their activities on the commission were marked by this latent feeling of retaliation.

The tension on the commission precedes the 56th legislature. One emblematic example took place in 2013 when the Evangelical pastor Marco Feliciano found himself at the centre of an episode widely reported in the media when he was elected president of the CDHM, nominated, at the time, by the Social Christian Party (PSC).¹² His election triggered a response from various groups campaigning for human rights, who staged a series of protests, hindering the start of the commission's work. Before this occurrence, the religious parliamentarians mainly acted in coordination behind the scenes (Antunes Filho, Mosca Pinezi & Jard da Silva, 2019; Barros, Bernardes & Pinto, 2018), less commonly making their arguments explicit in public speeches.

¹² In Portuguese: *Partido Social Cristão*.

Also on 20 August, while accessing the profiles of the Bolsonaroist parliamentarians that I organized on Twitter, I saw a post being shared about the publication of a video with a red background and the announcement:

Figure 3: Post on the Twitter profile of Otoni de Paula (PSC/RJ)



The publication of this video on the YouTube channel of Otoni de Paula was linked in the post on the Rio deputy's Twitter profile, which contained the alert: THE BIGGEST ABERRATION PRODUCED BY THE LEFT! THEY WANT TO LEGALIZE INCEST AND ORGIES! This post was one of the elements that preceded a turbulent ordinary deliberative meeting of the Chamber of Deputies Commission for Human Rights and Minorities.

Using images transmitted by TV Câmara,¹³ the video shows the deputy Otoni de Paula (PSC/RJ) on the pulpit of the plenary session of the Chamber of Deputies making an explosive speech and accompanied by a dramatic sound track worthy of a dubbed action movie trailer.¹⁴ The video carries the signature watermark of the politician's Twitter account. A decontextualized speech by the deputy Orlando Silva (PCdoB¹⁵/SP), author of the law bill for the Twenty-First Century Family Statute, in which he asserts that "incest is a centuries-old taboo," is the starting point for the narrative construction and a hook for the discourse of Deputy Otoni de Paula in which he rails against the left and contends that the proposed bill is a risk to the family as an institution. The deputy Pastor Sargento Isidório (Avante/BA) emerges and stands behind Otoni de Paula with a copy of the Holy Bible held to his chest. The speech by the Rio deputy took place in the Ulysses Guimarães Plenary a few hours before publication of the video at 17:40:

Madam President, Honourable Deputies, I wish to call your attention to the greatest aberration that perhaps this Chamber has ever witnessed. Deputy Soraya, chair of this Commission, you are a mother. A mother! Honourable deputies from the left, the right, the centre, I believe one thing unites us here: the family. Because all of us have a family. Deputy Orlando Silva's bill is the greatest aberration this Nation has ever seen. And this isn't a religious argument, it's the argument of one parent to the other parents present in this plenary. Article 2 of the Twenty-First Family Statute states: "All forms of union between two or more persons are recognized as families..." Deputy Orlando Silva wants to legalize group sex [*suruba*]! He wants to legalize group sex! Anyone who wants group sex can go ahead, but don't transform that into a family! And there's more. This iniquitous bill states: "...which for this purpose is constituted by and based on love, socioaffectivity, irrespective" – note how absurd this is! – "of

¹³ A Brazilian public TV network that broadcasts activities from the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies.

¹⁴ The video can be watched at <https://youtu.be/PhnbHjTDS2A>.

¹⁵ Communist Party of Brazil, *Partido Comunista do Brasil*.

consanguinity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, creed or race” – and pay attention to this bit! – “including their children or persons who considered to be such.” So in other words, if this bill is passed, a father will be able to marry his daughter, a son will be able to marry his mother. In the name of love. Deputy Orlando Silva, you are a father to a daughter. I wish to appeal to your good sense because I do not believe you have your own personal interests in this wretched bill that you’ve set before us (Chamber of Deputies, 2019a).

On the same day, in light of the repercussions of the attack on the law bill, a “note of clarification” was published on the website of the CDHM, signed by the president of the commission, Helder Salomão (PT/ES). This would be interpreted by the set of conservative deputies as a retreat by the left. A conservative victory.

Figure 4: Image published on the Twitter profile of Deputy Carla Zambelli



Before we explore the meeting in depth, a point should be made about the bill removed from the commission’s agenda and the only matter discussed that afternoon. Law Bill 3369/2015 sets out to implement the Twenty-First Century Families Statute. Its Article 2 served as a catalyst for the conservative reaction, including among the Bolsonaroists. The text recognizes as a family configuration the “union between two or more persons” irrespective of “consanguinity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, creed or race, including their children or persons considered to be such.”

21 August 2019. The day after the post. Ordinary deliberative meeting of the Commission for Human Rights and Minorities, Annex II, Plenary 9. Meeting scheduled for discussion of bills and voting. Venue full. Contrary to what I had imagined, present were, almost exclusively, registered Chamber professionals, advisors and a few journalists. No conservative activist groups had turned up, confounding my expectations.¹⁶ My anticipation that these activists would attend stemmed from the fact that one of the bills on the agenda – the one highlighted in the post by Deputy Otoni de Paula – had made a big impact on social media on the eve of the meeting. Law Bill 3369/2015, introduced by Orlando Silva, the bill for the Twenty-First Century Family Statute, would be branded by conservatives as the Orgy and Incest Bill.¹⁷

¹⁶ This comment relates to the beginning of my research. Until March 2019, the focus of my doctoral investigation was on the actions of organized groups of conservative activists in the National Congress.

¹⁷ The grouping calling itself conservative in the Chamber of Deputies is mainly represented by deputies from the Evangelical Bloc. This collective was the primary object of study in Tatiane Duarte’s ethnography, “‘The house of the wicked will crumble, but the tent of the righteous will flourish’: the participation of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front in the Brazilian legislature” (Duarte, 2011; original in Portuguese). Although every Bolsonaroist deputy calls themselves conservative, the opposite is not the case, not even as a category of accusation.

Figure 5: Screen capture of the post on Deputy Daniel Silveira's Twitter profile



Despite the absence of the public, the meeting was attended by a large number of parliamentarians and quickly attained the quorum needed for it to start. With all the seats occupied, I had to accompany the session standing. Some commission positions are essential to understand how the work is organized. We can begin with the chair of the commission, occupied by the Workers' Party (PT) in the figure of Deputy Helder Salomão, elected from Espírito Santo state. According to the Chamber of Deputies' regulations, the presidencies of the commissions and the places allocated to members and substitutes are distributed among the coalitions and parties, with the largest of these enjoying advantages in the choice of presidencies and the number of seats.¹⁸ The vice-presidents of the commission are, first, Father João (PT/MG); second, Túlio Gadêlha (PDT¹⁹/PE); and third, Camilo Capiberibe (PSB/AP). 11 of the 18 seats making up the commission were from the PSL/PP/PSD/MDB/PL/REPUBLICANOS/DEM/PSDB/PTB/PSC/PMN coalition, four were taken by the PDT/PODE/SOLIDARIEDADE/PCdoB/PATRIOTA/CIDADANIA/PROS/AVANTE/PV/DC coalition and three by the PT/PSB/PSOL/REDE coalition.

To the right of the table where the commission's work is organized are concentrated the deputies from the conservative end of the spectrum. In the middle and to the left, the other deputies mix. At the start of the proceedings, Filipe Barros (PSL/PR) calls for a point of order, which, as he certifies, "precedes the reading of the minutes," as stated in the *Regimento da Casa*.²⁰ The deputy from Londrina, Paraná state, accuses the commission president Helder Salomão of failing to respect the agreements reached on the commission. According to his accusation, a pact exists concerning those bills that have failed to obtain a consensus among the commission's participants prior to the meeting: these should be officially withdrawn from the agenda with the aim of ensuring that voting on the set of law bills and motions occurs as smoothly and swiftly as possible. Barros accuses Salomão of failing to abide by this agreement. Sometimes, he claims, the president would re-present bills on which no consensus exists as a strategy for them to be passed with less resistance – a ruse intended to catch opponents of the bill by surprise. Having made his accusation, Filipe Barros tells the commission that the PSL

¹⁸ The election of the Executive Board and the presidencies of the commissions and the organization of their work have been carefully analysed in the doctoral thesis by Luiz Eduardo Abreu, "The Labyrinths of the Minotaur" (see Abreu, 1999).

¹⁹ Democratic Labour Party, *Partido Democrático Trabalhista*.

²⁰ The use of the regulations as a strategic political instrument in the National Congress is an essential part of a parliamentarian's apprenticeship: "as well as establishing rules for the use of words, their institutional effects and a set of activities where words can be used in accordance with these rules, it also creates (and use of this term is not fortuitous) 'institutional quantities' such as budget allocations and posts" (Abreu, 1999). It also creates institutional qualities with a lawmaker's intervention the result of combining their political action with the possibilities afforded by the rules established in the internal regulations.

will block proceedings and highlights the issue of the day's business, the bill for the Twenty-First Century Family Statute, the "absurd bill of Deputy Orlando Silva, which legalizes incest and other aberrations." The Londrina deputy makes clear her group's disposition for conflict: "We wish to be respected and heard on this commission." The 'we' here is an allusion to the deputies from the right-wing and conservative end of the spectrum, who, according to Barros, are not heard and are treated differently in the meeting, while the left-wing parliamentarians are favoured by the president and by the commission's proceedings. At this moment, a left-right polarization is articulated. The final accusation in the Londrina deputy's speech concerns the note issued the previous day. In the parliamentarian's view, the commission's president had taken sides in the clash over the law bill, which was inappropriate for the person responsible for organizing its work in a technical and impartial form.

The floor is handed over to the deputy Police Chief Eder Mauro (then affiliated to the PSD²¹/PA, today the PL/PA). He declares in a raised voice: "I fully agree in kind (gender) ...and I mean gender in another sense²² (...) everything here on this commission is about gender, it even worries me." The deputy Pastor Feliciano (PL/SP) contributes to the polemic and adds, speaking ironically in his deep gospel singer voice, "foodstuff" (*gênero alimentício*). Eder Mauro says that he is surprised about the withdrawal of Law Bill 3369/2015, introduced by the deputy from the PCdoB, "who isn't even present here," and who, according to the Pará politician, still in a raised voice, "is instituting the Orgy Statute of the Twenty-First Century Families, because this is an aberration brought before the Chamber of Deputies." The president Helder Salomão interrupts, asking for moderation in the use of language and suggests removing from the word *suruba* from the shorthand notes so as to "avoid lowering the level of the debate." Police Chief Eder Mauro, holding a printed copy of the bill, says mockingly: "What is the lower level is there than this bill, Mr President? The word I used, I think it was too polite even." He receives applause and maintains his strong and aggressive tone of voice.

It is unacceptable that a citizen such as this, **if one can call this Orlando a citizen**, wants the family... wants a father to be able to marry his daughter, the mother to marry her son, the sister to marry the dog... for the love of God, my brother. The entire Brazilian people need to know about this. And if that were not enough, now he has failed to turn up, certainly ashamed of what he did, he ordered the bill removed from discussion... ashamed (...) My people, we are here. Where are the left-wingers? Come here, let's vote on the bill! Put forward the bill, I want to see how this situation is going to play out. Those of you who like to raise the green, yellow, multicolour flag, come here and discuss the bill and we'll see who is going to triumph here, we'll see whether the people aren't going to win this issue of recognizing the family as a family and not as the absurdity he is suggesting here. (Deputy Eder Mauro at the meeting of the CDHM, 19 August 2019, my emphasis)

Deputy Lincoln Portela (then belonging to the Republicans/MG, now the PL) takes the floor and argues that the word *suruba* can be used, recalling its inclusion in the Portuguese dictionary. Turning to his colleagues on the right, he advises them: "You can say *suruba*, it's not a swear word." The commission president Helder again asks for removal of the word *suruba* from the shorthand notes.

²¹ Social Democratic Party, *Partido Social Democrático*.

²² TN: The idiomatic expression used here in Portuguese is *quero concordar em gênero, número e grau*, which literally translates as "I wish to agree in gender, number and degree," implying full agreement. The term *gênero* translates according to context as gender, genus, genre, kind or (food) product/commodity, hence the play on words in this reported exchange.

Standing up, Deputy Sóstenes Cavalcante (then DEM/RJ, now PL/RJ) converses with a deputy in his first term of office, David Miranda (then PSOL/RJ, now PDT/RJ). The former is on his second mandate, belongs to the Evangelical bloc and includes in his office, as an advisor, the psychologist Rozangela Justino, a leading figure in the activist movement surrounding the ‘Gay Cure’ project.²³ The novice deputy is an LGBT activist. The two men converse smiling. The president Helder attempts to get the session back on track.

Taking the floor, Túlio Gadêlha (then PDT/PE, now REDE²⁴/PE) – the bill’s rapporteur on the commission – stresses that he has established cordial relations with parliamentarians from every part of the political spectrum and tells the meeting that it was his idea to withdraw the bill from the agenda. He recognizes that the text has problems in relation to its “legislative technique.” However, he argues that the bill, in essence, contemplates different family arrangements, such as, for instances, the cases of single mothers or a grandmother who lives alone with the son or grandson.

Deputy Orlando Silva (PCdoB) arrives at the plenary and asks the president to be able to speak as the bill’s author. Helder Salomão reminds the session that the regulations do not allow the author of the legislation to automatically precede the leaders of the parties or coalitions in this situation. Deputy Sóstenes Cavalcante offers to waive his right to speak first as a leader in order to listen to the author of the proposed bill. Deputy Orlando Silva, sat at the table where the commission’s work is organized, asks to speak first to respond to the criticisms from the parliamentarians and clear up the entire polemic: “I ask Marco Feliciano, my friend, who admires me so much... might he give way?” The deputy Pastor Marco Feliciano replies serenely: “Orlando, the fact is I’m going to cite you too.” Lots of deputies laugh. “Please, don’t misunderstand the word cite” (in Portuguese, *citar* also means to subpoena). The president Helder Salomão decides that there is no consensus. Police Chief Eder Mauro, wagging his finger, confirms there is none. Then Pastor Marco Feliciano, using his allotted time as leader, calmly makes the following pronouncement:

Mr President and honourable deputies, this meeting today is very important, including this debate, so that we can elucidate some facts. **First, I wish to demonstrate my deep respect for Deputy Orlando Silva, a deputy for a number of terms, we’ve been here working together for some time... and also for Deputy Túlio.** I told Túlio a short while ago that I’m a veteran... and he’s just arrived. [Túlio smiles.] He’s a freshman but a highly skilled freshman. (...) I remember very well when Deputy Orlando, there in the Chamber’s biggest plenary... he said jokingly – given they’ve approved the Family Statute now, I’m going to present the Modern Family Statute. I understood that this was said playfully, in a joking tone, and perhaps that is why the bill contains so many problems today. **It shows a poor legislative technique, a poor legislative technique in the construction of the text, as Túlio aptly put it here.** But what strikes me isn’t the interpretation of this or that: it’s how double standards exist in our country, including for progressive parties. (...) The bill was not twisted, you know that its poor legislative technique provided ample reason for a million thoughts (...) we understand that other family configurations exist, **the problem with this bill here, Orlando, is just the poor legislative technique. This allowed the precedent for us to have all this hubbub here** (Deputy Marco Feliciano in the meeting of the CDHM on 19 August 2019, my emphasis).

The deputy from the Evangelical Bloc Lincoln Portela echoes Sóstenes and waives his allotted time as leader so that Deputy Orlando Silva can speak first. The São Paulo parliamentarian confirms “the deep respect, and more than that, the **friendship** for almost everyone I know here” and states that “you cannot do politics without dialogue.” After this introduction, he defends himself and his bill. Police Chief Eder Mauro scowls and clutches a poster to his chest: “NO INCEST.”

²³ The case was reported by diverse media outlets, including Intercept Brasil: <https://theintercept.com/2017/09/19/autora-da-acao-da-cura-gay-tem-cargo-em-gabinete-de-deputado-evangelico/>

²⁴ Sustainability Network, *Rede Sustentabilidade*.

Lincoln Portela then takes the floor. From the Evangelical Bloc, a TV presenter, radio broadcaster and president of the Solidary Baptist Church. He calls himself a conservative.

First, I wish to praise the patience and kindness of the president (of the commission)... and praise the Orlando Silva's amenable demeanour. Even though I disagree with him completely and he knows so, he has a very amenable demeanour and is a great comrade... he is a colleague of mine, a comrade here in this Chamber, who I respect and with whom, in my local church, we once watched a match played by the Brazilian volley team and with him in my office, in my pastoral ministry (...) (Deputy Lincoln Portela in the meeting of the CDHM on 19 August 2019, my emphasis).

The Minas Gerais deputy goes on to criticize the *hermeneutics* of the bill and makes some observations about its *legislative technique*. The parliamentarian's speech is serene in tone. Next up, Deputy Sóstenes Cavalcante criticizes the bill harshly and claims that the text allows room for paedophilia, incest and marriage between three or more people. Filipe Barros takes the floor again. He announces that they will maintain their obstruction and that they will be able to extend it for up to six months:

We're going to obstruct the work of this commission until you finally respect people who think differently to yourself. (...) we have a majority on this commission and that's why we are telling you, Deputy Helder Salomão, that from today we want to be respected (Deputy Sóstenes Cavalcante in the meeting of the CDHM on 19 August 2019).

None of the bills or motions scheduled for the meeting were discussed; the contributions revolved solely around the bill removed from the agenda the day before, Law Bill 3369/2015, and criticisms relating to the organization of the commission's work and the left. The speeches continued until the Items on the Agenda were reached, when the deputies began to leave the meeting and head to the Ulysses Guimarães Plenary to register their attendance and take part in roll call voting. The presidency of the commission extended the meeting a little to hear the final parliamentarians listed to speak, Kátia Sastre (then PSL/SP, now PL/SP) and Chris Tonietto (then PSL/RJ, now PL/RJ). Neither woman is a member of the commission but they made use of their parliamentary right to speak and participate in the work of the commissions. Both made confrontational and aggressive speeches with the commission room already empty.

The São Paulo deputy is a serving military police officer and subsequently became known for responding to an armed assault at her daughter's school on her day off work, during a parent-teacher meeting, when she killed the assailant. A video of this killing was used at the start of her campaign to become a federal deputy, in 2018, until the Regional Electoral Court of São Paulo demanded its removal after determining that the electoral propaganda encouraged shooting people.²⁵ On the commission, the parliamentarian attacks the 'disgusting' bill, labelling it in favour of paedophilia and an attack on the 'family.'

Next, Chris Tonietto, a 'pro-life' (anti-abortion) Catholic activist, attacks the left and the bill. The following day, a video is published on a YouTube channel under the title "Conservative deputies quarrel with leftists who are in favour of INCEST between parents and children." The content features the Rio deputy and her colleague, Police Chief Eder Mauro. The video highlights the following part of the former deputy's speech, made at the end of the meeting in question.²⁶

We know perfectly well what strategy they adopt. They want to manipulate semantics because they make use, for example, of the schools of Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, who talk very well of the manipulation of semantics, changing the meaning of words, and it's exactly what they say (...) so through semantic manipulations they impose

²⁵ The report was published by the newspaper *Estado de São Paulo* <https://politica.estadao.com.br/blogs/fausto-macedo/tribunal-suspende-propaganda-da-cabo-katia-matando-ladrao-a-tiros-na-porta-da-escola/>

²⁶ From the YouTube channel Política 100 Censura: <https://youtu.be/ToLWtVWLyLc>.

their interests and we know very well what these are, hidden interests, obscure even, intended to betray the good faith of others, and the families that assist us are being exposed to depravity right now (...) and this type of school of Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, post-structuralism will be buried here, we will make sure to unmask this moral garbage (Deputy Chris Tonietto at the meeting of the CDHM on 19 August 2019).

Figure 6: Screen capture of the video posted on the Política 100 Censura YouTube channel



At the end of the meeting, counting those lawmakers who exercised their right to speak as members or substitutes on the commission, leaders of parties or coalitions, four deputies declared support for the bill while another seven attacked the text. Initially, then, we can classify this polarization as a historic clash between deputies linked to the left of the political spectrum and parliamentarians positioned to the right. Taking into account the content involved in the debate, this confrontation can be analysed as conservative versus progressive.

Here I focus on the conservatives, the broader group with which the Bolsonaro group is associated. In a recent article, Marcos Quadros and Rafael Madeira (2018) describe a phenomenon they classify as a shift away from the “embarrassed right.” The authors argue that a change took place in the discourse of some parliamentarians in the Chamber of Deputies in the time span from the 1988 Constituent Assembly to 2018 – and especially after 2013 – with an intensification of the self-identification of deputies with the right of the political spectrum and conservatism.

Although in the speech cited at the start of this article Deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro mentions Pastor Marco Feliciano as an important element in his narrative on the right that the National Congress will now have to ‘swallow,’ it is important to stress that the parliamentary performances of the Bolsonaro deputies are strikingly different from the kind shown by Feliciano at the time of the Republicans, today the PL. Though clearly on the conservative end of the political spectrum, the pastor is a figure who, in his party career, has always been a member of coalitions, including sometimes forming part of the governing coalition of the two Dilma Rousseff administrations. His relational repertoire is closer to the behaviour predominant in the National Congress, which anticipates courteous treatment of parliamentary colleagues. Although there exist moments of fierce dispute involving political issues and clashes, these coexist with discursive elements that emphasize cordiality.

Courteous treatment is a hallmark still mostly present in relations between parliamentarians. This dynamic is described in the inaugural ethnography dedicated to Brazil’s National Congress, *Os Caminhos da Casa*, by Maria Cecília Costa, where the author presents the idea that “the politician’s ability in **legislative technique** is directly linked to their ability to establish personal relations” (my emphasis) with their peers: this, she wrote, was an important element of the *parliamentary art* (1980). Although disputes in parliament are severely unequal and

the clashes and debates frequently contain doses of animosity and aggression, most parliamentarians seek to establish a courteous familiarity. Indeed, it is common for their declarations to affirm friendship and fraternity among themselves. Although Pastor Marco Feliciano is one of the deputies who has most often campaigned against the left in diverse ways and hoisted the conservative flag in discourses in the plenary over the two previous legislatures, second only to then deputy Jair Bolsonaro (Quadros & Madeira, 2018), the lawmaker's approach differs from the behaviour repeatedly pursued by the Bolsonaroist deputies: the latter maintain a more latent and constant tension in the interactions observed during their parliamentary performances on commissions in the National Congress.

Figure 7: Screen capture of the post on the Twitter profile of Deputy Carla Zambelli



Returning to the analysis of the meeting, Feliciano's pattern of behaviour also applies to the deputies Lincoln Portela and Sóstenes Cavalcante, both from the Evangelical Bloc, known as fervent defenders of conservative agendas with a party history linked to the electoral base that ensured the coalition presidentialism after the 1988 Constituent Assembly (Abranches, 1988). By contrast, the behaviour of the deputies from the Bolsonaroist group exhibits a markedly disruptive performativity (Rocha 2018, Warner 2002). This is nonetheless somewhat adapted and dampened by the relational pattern of the Chamber of Deputies, which, in addition to the hallmark of courtesy, contains many elements of formalism, some set out in its regulations.²⁷

It is important to think of the National Congress as a privileged space for the propagation of messages and images. Although, in the meeting analysed here, no advance had been made in the agenda and no voting had taken place on any bill or motion, the clash that afternoon had a series of repercussions: parliamentarians engaged in doing politics, produced content, connected with their public and maintained latent controversies that feed into their agendas. Although considerable prominence is given to parliament as a space for voting on and approving laws, the everyday world of the elected women and men is mostly taken up with many diverse engagements, whether public hearings, formal sessions or deliberative meetings, which leave traces and form part of the stages on which ideas are propagated and parliamentary performances are reiterated. Luiz Eduardo Abreu stresses that these activities, especially those of the commissions, acquire importance in the Legislature's routine by connecting with broader conflicts and alliances, whose interested and implicated parties are not limited "to the elected politicians, bureaucrats and/or technical staff, but involve diverse sectors of civil society, public opinion, other countries, foreign investors and so on" (Abreu, 1999). Thinking about

²⁷ Article 73 of Chapter 1 on Chamber Sessions in the Internal Regulations establishes the rules for maintaining the "order, respect and austerity of the sessions." Among the items listed, "no deputy will be allowed to speak without requesting permission to do so and without the President granting such" and when addressing a colleague "the deputy will address him or her with the appropriate courtesy title" (Chamber of Deputies, 2019b).

actions in the National Congress invites us to think about the wide scope of the events that mark the agenda of parliamentarians, including apparently less productive moments that are full of doing politics, even when deliberative sessions do not conclude with voting or with any progress being made in the legislative business at hand.

POSSIBLE PATHS

Isabela Kalil in “Who are Jair Bolsonaro’s voters and what do they believe in?” (2018)²⁸ points out that the electorate that prevailed in 2018 is wide and diverse, not limited to a single profile or corresponding solely to the set of issues backed by the PSL’s candidate for the presidency. This observation helps us in a reading of the Bolsonarist Bloc, which also interacts with a broad and segmented public. These deputies are related to a wider range of elements than those represented by the now former president. Indeed, there are moments when, to maintain consistency vis-à-vis Bolsonarism, it may be necessary to ignore a presidential guideline on voting in the National Congress. In the name of governability, the Bolsonaro government was forced to negotiate with other political actors, principally members of the (in)famous *Centrão* or ‘Big Centre.’²⁹ These situations would seem to work against the anti-system image³⁰ promoted during the election campaign and that remains an important element for some of the public/supporters of Bolsonarism.

On 21 July 2020, a second round of voting approved Constitutional Amendment Proposal (PEC) 15/2020,³¹ which introduced alterations to the Basic Education Development Fund (FUNDEB).³² The leader of the government in the Chamber of Deputies at the time, Deputy Major Vitor Hugo (then PSL/GO, now PL/GO), and the Secretary of Government, General Ramos, campaigned against approval of the proposal throughout its passage through National Congress. Realizing they were set for defeat, however, they changed tack in an attempt to associate themselves to the victorious side. There were 499 votes in favour. The next day, the newspapers reported that the only votes against were from some Bolsonarist parliamentarians.

On the evening of 21 July, the deputies who, at that moment, called themselves “PSL / Alliance for Brazil” – namely, Bia Kicis (then PSL/DF, now PL/DF), Chris Tonietto (then PSL/RJ, now PL/RJ), Luiz Phillippe de Orleans e Bragança (then PSL/SP, now PL/SP) and Márcio Labre (then PSL/RJ, now PL/RJ) – held a live stream on YouTube called “WHY DID WE VOTE AGAINST THE FUNDEB PEC?” The crux of their argument was that voting in favour of the proposal would mean favouring a stronger State. As a group that advocates less state presence in people’s lives, these parliamentarians identify the public power as a real threat to the institution of the ‘family’ and ‘freedom.’ In terms of the educational agenda, the risks identified by this group are part of a broader set of concerns relating to the alleged indoctrination of children in schools. This theme lies at the core of the intentions of conservative lawmakers when it comes to projects like the ‘Party-Free School’ (*Escola sem Partido*) and regulations on home-schooling. Accompanying the range of arguments advanced by the set

28 TN: Original article title in Portuguese: “Quem são e no que acreditam os eleitores de Jair Bolsonaro.”

29 *Centrão* is the name given to a network of parliamentarians who lack any specific ideological orientation and to whom a more ‘physiological’ attitude is attributed. Irrespective of the government in power, this group seeks a relation of proximity and cooperation to influence the allocation of the public budget, the acquisition of funds, the destination of amendments of interest to their electoral bases, and the nomination of elected representatives to occupy public posts.

30 This anti-systemic emulation is identified by Fabiano Santos and Talita Tanscheit as one of the pillars of the ‘radical right,’ characterized by “hostility to the political system and to the form through which political representation is performed in the country, seeking to suppress opposing discourses and political parties” (Santos & Tanscheit, 2019) – as Isabela Kalil observed in her research with voters of Jair Bolsonaro, “against all the parties,’ ‘against all politicians,’ ‘against everything and everyone” (Kalil, 2018). These images, ideas and candidates are targeted at a public for whom any solution to contemporary problems lies outside the political system, thus presenting politicians who promote themselves as antagonistic to the “old politics” and to the “political system” (Almeida, 2019). In the case of Bolsonarism, this involves a universe of ideas whose main reference is a figure who in fact occupied a post in the Chamber of Deputies for seven consecutive legislatures, a clearly self-contradictory construct.

31 In Portuguese, *Proposta de Emenda à Constituição*.

32 In Portuguese, *Fundo de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica*.

of parliamentarians on their social networks, they all reinforce the idea that ultimately the group's position was to remain consistent with the set of ideas defended by Bolsonarism, which included the assertion that Jair Bolsonaro had voted against the PEC when he was a federal deputy.

Although Jair Bolsonaro kept his electoral base engaged and received more than 58 million votes in the second round of the 2022 presidential elections, the inconsistencies between the discourses and the actions demanded by the paths of governability ended up generating negative reactions from sectors of the Bolsonarist voter bases. Diverse episodes left them feeling obliged to take a stance in response to the inconsistency between the government's stated positions, actions and voting. One example of this sort of tension occurred with Deputy Carla Zambelli (PL/SP), who was questioned about using resources from the Electoral Fund, which she had pronounced against during the first years of the legislature. In the corridors of the Chamber of Deputies, it is common to hear the idea that a politician replying publicly to a criticism is a sign that he or she felt the blow.

Just as – based on the segmentation of Jair Bolsonaro's voters presented in Isabela Kalil's work (2018) – we can infer that Bolsonarism is a broader, more segmented and more complex political force than the set of issues defended by Jair Bolsonaro himself, so we can surmise that the Bolsonarist Bloc is linked to a symbolic universe with some autonomy from the existence of Bolsonaro and his government. Hence, deputies can create distinct connections with the different sectors of the large Bolsonarist voter base, enabling one parliamentarian to act focus more on radical groups of ruralists, while others maintain a stronger connection with pro-gun lobbies or with religious fundamentalists in their war against abortion under any circumstances, to cite some of the issues that mobilize them.

This more extensive character of Bolsonarism opens a range of possibilities for the future evolution and fate of this collective, leaving it for us to discover over the next few years whether the group will continue to thrive after the electoral defeat of Jair Bolsonaro in 2022 and, if so, whether it will carry on under the same label. Irrespective of the name it goes under, all the signs are that the far right occupied a space in Brazil's parliament, a fact we will be left to deal with for some time to come.

THEMATIC BLOCS

The existence of cross-party thematic blocs in the National Congress is a phenomenon little investigated in Brazil's social sciences. The Evangelical Bloc, the Pro-Gun Bloc (*Bancada da Bala*) and the Ruralist Bloc are the most famous and have been the subject of investigations in doctoral theses and masters' dissertations.³³ In these studies, a recurrent ambiguity can be discerned in the use of two different typologies for the distinct groupings: the *frentes parlamentares* (parliamentary fronts or coalitions) and the *bancadas temáticas suprapartidárias* (cross-party thematic blocs) or *bancadas informais* (informal blocs). Nonetheless, crucial differences exist between these two types: the parliamentary coalitions are registered and possess a specific bureaucratic process for their recognition.³⁴ The thematic blocs, on the other hand, function without being formally registered and commonly refer to groups of parliamentarians who act in conjunction, while the coalitions are officially calculated using the signatures obtained for their creation and registration. It is worth stressing that although these groups work together, the degree of mobilization varies depending on circumstances. Moreover, within this associated set, the particularities of its members imply a heterogeneity in the group's internal composition. Accustomed

33 See Duarte, 2011; Faganello, 2015; Lacerda, 2018; Quadros & Madeira, 2018; Santana, 2016; Santos 2018.

34 The Act of the Board of the Chamber of Deputies n. 69 of 10/11/2015 created the register of Parliamentary Coalitions in the Chamber of Deputies, defining these as "a cross-party association of at least **one third of members of the Federal Legislature**, intended to promote the improvement of federal legislation for a particular sector of society" (my emphasis). The institutionalization of the coalitions allows the requirement to be made to utilize the physical space of the Chamber of Deputies and ensures that their activities are widely broadcast by TV Câmara, Rádio Câmara, Jornal da Câmara and on the Chamber of Deputies website.

to working with information produced by institutions or through the use of surveys, political science tends to perceive an “absence of public and widely available data” as an obstacle to the study of thematic blocs (Araújo & Silva, 2016). The dynamic and informal nature of these groupings implies a less rigid and less institutionalized object of study than, for example, the political party, an important and traditional topic in political science. In response to this difficulty, ethnography can offer an approach with the flexibility and precision needed to produce information on these types of collectives. Questions that can be investigated through field research include how these blocs emerge and act in political processes, considering their dynamics and their constant formation and transformation, whether in response to their internal dynamics or as a result of their relations with other groups, actors and institutions.

Another aspect that appears to be an obstacle to the examination of these phenomena of parliamentary organization – both the coalitions and the thematic blocs – is the fact that the questions and analyses of political science sometimes require verification of the effectiveness of the actions of these configurations vis-a-vis the decision-making of the National Congress as a whole. This confusion, linked to the search for generalizations, models of predictability that conceive of parliament as one big game, and a normative posture vis-à-vis the analysed political models of what democracy should be, seem to distance these kinds of investigations from the dilemmas experienced and confronted by the actors within their actual political contexts. These hallmarks of the analytic process become obstacles to understanding the everyday experience of parliamentarians in responding to challenges, which manifest in their experience as practical problems that are always contextualized: “As a result a problem is always a practical problem, **never a universal problem mattering for everybody**. Problems of the ecology of practices are also practical problems in this strong sense, that is problems for practitioners” (Stengers, 2013: 113). Following this idea, rather than seek to understand the effectiveness of strategies and organizations, it seems to make sense to follow the traces of the question that Suely Araújo herself poses in her article, where she reviews past studies and proposes a new agenda for research in the Brazilian parliament: “if the parliamentary coalitions and thematic blocs matter so little, which would seem to be implied by the scant attention given to them in legislative studies, why do the lawmakers insist in forming them?” (Araújo & Silva, 2015, 2016).

FINAL REMARKS: Parliament as a source of practices

This article is part of a wider ethnographic investigation along the paths taken by the performances and practices of Brazilian federal lawmakers, which sees their activities as a key element in doing politics, taking a group of associated deputies as its starting point. Setting out from this group, the work involves accessing a network with heterogenic elements, focusing attention on the quality of these connections and the types of flows in which they are enveloped in particular circumstances and over a specific period of time. This investigation takes the Bolsonaroist Bloc as both a starting point and as its main analytic focus.

This aim in mind, it is important to work with a concept of network that allows this complexity to be approached, comprehending it as a set of heterogenous elements, which remain associated through social interactions that occur amid a range of events and circumstances (Strathern, 1996). In the case of this collective of Bolsonaroist deputies, it is important to consider the elements that make a difference in their specific way of doing politics, in their parliamentary activities, and that have impacts in the Chamber of Deputies. Among the components in action are: public workers employed in the National Congress; commissioned office-holders, party structures and party leaders; activists and mobilized groups; emoticons, memes and GIFs; executives at municipal, state and federal levels; the judiciary; regulations for the Chamber of Deputies and the National Congress; agendas for the commissions and plenaries; law bills and motions; and the press – here initially represented by the professionals, communications media and published reports. These and other potential

mediators – again using Bruno Latour’s term (Latour, 2012; Latour & Woolgar, 1997) – are all present in the parliamentary exercise and, in the case of the Bolsonarist deputies, can take on singular forms in terms of how this set of associations is realized and concretized as a collective practice.

In an approach to this network and these sets of action that considers power relations, it is important to understand how power is realized, how it happens, how a group manages to ensure its actions prevail against those of rivals, or how a group resists its actions being successfully countered. For this reason, it is interesting to extend the mapping of the network repercussions, describe these connections, and catalogue the elements associated in these actions.

As part of the search to understand and describe what makes a difference in this set of associations, this investigation deals with a diverse range of elements, believing that one possible way forward is to analyse this concatenation in flux, without organizing it in sections or categories, such as document analysis, social network analysis, discourse analysis and analysis of the deputies’ performance... The ethnographic challenge here is to shape the descriptive choices that best potentialize the exposition of the connected elements over the course of events and actions and best relate them as a continuous experience,³⁵ like the one we have seen in the day-to-day work of Brazil’s parliament.

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³⁵ An important consideration to be made here concerns the virtual elements of the network of deputies, especially those found on social networks. It is important to stress that this approach seeks to eschew an idea of *communication channels* in order to understand them instead as *relational spaces* (Segata, 2014). The current use and interaction with digital tools distance the proposed analysis from a split/boundary between online and offline life, my interest instead being to relate the path of associations and assemble their traces so as to assist in the understanding of these sets of action.

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