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# Communicating like a Bolsonaro

Projection of Bolsonarist strategic narratives through anti-China memes

Master's Thesis

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I have written the Master's Thesis myself, independently. All of the other authors' texts, main viewpoints and all data from other resources have been referred to.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The week of 3-7 May 2021 was Brazil's National Week of Communications, "[...] an entire week of announcements, deliveries and 'spoilers' of how the [Brazil's] future will be with new technologies"<sup>1</sup>. The highlight of the event was 5 May, *Digital Day*, which held demonstrations of different uses of 5G technology. Digital Day was hosted at the National Congress in Brazil's capital, and had President Jair Bolsonaro speaking at the opening ceremony, early in the morning. Instead of talking about 5G technology, Bolsonaro talked about Covid-19:

*It is a new virus, no one knows if it was born in a laboratory or through some human being [who] ingested an inappropriate animal. But it is there. The military knows what chemical, bacteriologic and radiologic war is. Could it be that we are facing a new war? What country grew its GDP the most? I am not going to tell you.*<sup>2</sup> (my translation)

China is the world's leading country in 5G technology. It has also been Brazil's number one trading partner since 2009, top investor since 2019, and main supplier of active pharmaceutical ingredients for the Covid-19 vaccines being produced in the country. And yet, Bolsonaro chose "to meme" China, disregarding the negative consequences this could have — for the economy and for the management of the pandemic. Similar statements have been frequent, coming from other members of government (including three ministers), and are never unauthorized by the President, who escalated the problem by insinuating that China may have created the coronavirus in a lab (a theory already debunked by the WHO<sup>3</sup>), and could be engaging in a biological war, against Brazil in particular and/or the world as a whole. Furthermore, the President has expressed racism by appealing to an urban legend (which still generates several internet memes in Brazil)

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.br/mcom/pt-br/assuntos/semana-nacional-das-comunicacoes>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOQ\\_a7qxArg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOQ_a7qxArg)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55996728>

that claims that Covid-19 happened because someone in China ate an “[...] inappropriate animal [...]” (to see how the “bat soup” narrative quickly spread in Brazil, through clusters of pro-Bolsonaro influencers on social media, see Malini et al. 2020). Narratives like that are not random, they serve a purpose, they are strategic.

In Bolsonarism, the perception of an imminent threat, the fear of a permanent enemy and the logic of conflict are embedded in its meaning-making process (Rocha 2021). The Bolsonarist’s main narrative is based on a conspiracy that “[...] an international communist plot to destroy the nation [...]” is occurring, which, in turn, has been strategically used throughout the 20th century in Brazilian politics. According to Rodrigo Patto Sá Motta, a historian and the author of *On Guard Against the Red Menace: Anti-Communism in Brazil, 1917-1964*, “[...] the red menace is the most powerful threat used to scare Brazilians—both in the past and today [...] Without a doubt, conspiracy theories have helped authoritarians, time and time again, in Brazil [...]” (Motta 2020)<sup>4</sup>.

Bolsonarism, as one of the most refined examples of digital populism, not only did it form, articulate and thrive in social media, but it also relies heavily on the business model of Social Network Sites (SNS), which is based on user-generated content (Cesarino 2020a). This thesis focuses on one specific form of user-generated content, namely internet memes, which have played an important role in Brazilian politics for a while now, and are an established part of Brazilian political communication. The 2014 presidential election is considered the “election of memes” by Brazilian journalists (Chagas et al. 2017), while the 2018 election, the one Bolsonaro won, is considered the “fake news election” (Jardelino et al. 2020). Eduardo Bolsonaro, son of the president and until recently President of the Congressional Committee on Foreign Affairs and National Defense (January 2019 - March 2021), tells people in the Right not to engage in online discussions with the Left. Instead, they should do as he does: make memes<sup>5</sup>. On this point, the Bolsonarist base has not been shy in answering that call, with some of their creations making it all the way to the President’s social media accounts, adding to the list of several internet memes that he publishes himself. These memes are not random either, they are packed with political rhetoric and also serve a purpose. As such internet memes can be employed with the objective of

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/how-anti-communist-conspiracies-haunt-brazil/614665/>

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<https://revistaforum.com.br/politica/para-eduardo-bolsonaro-direita-nao-deve-entrar-em-discussoes-politicas-mas-fazer-memes/>

distracting the public, but they can also be employed to cultivate a strong sense of identity and belonging (Phillips & Milner 2017). Taken altogether, these dynamics point to the need for a further investigation into the use of internet memes as magnifiers in the projection of strategic narratives.

The objective of this thesis is to study how internet memes can be used as a medium to project strategic narratives—particularly when the audiences of a narrative embed it into memes (consciously or not), projecting it even further; a question which has sparked debate in academia and society at large. Academically, on one hand, there is a pressing need to research and understand how narratives are projected visually (Crilly 2015). On the other, there are other analyses of Bolsonarist internet memes as political communication in Brazil (Nigro et al. 2019; Milanezi 2019; Chagas & Magalhães 2020), and one considers memes depicting Bolsonaro as different archetypes and reflecting political events within the country (Chagas 2020), but no research has been done with internet memes related to Bolsonaro’s foreign policy. As such, this thesis is a modest contribution which is intended to fill both of these gaps. Finally, the social relevance of this thesis joins the attention to memes as triggers of anger (Stevens 2021) and memes as a genre for conspiracy theorizing online (Varis 2019). Particular to the Brazilian context, it recognizes the established role of internet memes in Brazilian politics, as a guarantor of access to debate (Chagas 2019a), but also adds to a recent study connecting memes to the growing anti-China sentiment in Brazil, that is being reflected in different spheres of the society<sup>6</sup>. To give some examples, Brazilian senators have expressed serious concern about attacks against China on pro-Bolsonaro social media<sup>7</sup>, representatives of agribusiness are worried about the antagonistic approach taken by Bolsonaro’s government towards China<sup>8</sup>, and representatives of bilateral trade have expressed that Bolsonaro’s negative comments about China are an obstacle to business with China and to Chinese investment in Brazil.<sup>9</sup> Also, a recent study<sup>10</sup> showing the

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<sup>6</sup> There are no opinion polls of Brazilians’ opinions about China, differently from about the United States, for example. The Latin American Opinion Project (LAPOP) measures that (and many other issues) yearly, since 2006. <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www12.senado.leg.br/noticias/materias/2020/04/06/senadores-demonstram-preocupacao-com-ataques-a-china-nas-redes-sociais>

<sup>8</sup> <https://amazonasatual.com.br/ruralistas-reclamam-de-sentimento-anti-china-no-governo-bolsonaro/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://economia.uol.com.br/noticias/redacao/2021/05/16/fala-de-bolsonaro-afasta-maior-investidor-e-parceiro-comercial-do-brasil.htm>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.cps.unb.br/destaques/52-brasileiros-resistem-a-vacinas-da-china-e-da-russia>

rejection of Chinese vaccines may shed some light on an alarming trend: rejection is much higher among those who consider Bolsonaro's government good or great.

In order to understand the Bolsonarist meaning-making process behind its strategic narratives about China, and how these are reflected in internet memes, this thesis is guided by two research questions:

1. What are the Bolsonarist strategic narratives about China?
2. How are Bolsonarist strategic narratives about China expressed in internet memes?

To answer them, this thesis draws on a theoretical framework that combines semiotics of culture (mainly from Tartu-Moscow School—TMS), strategic narrative theory, strategic conspiracy narratives, and digital populism in order to perform a two-step analysis. Below is a roadmap of how this thesis is structured.

The first chapter, *Historiography*, presents a literature review of previous works on similar topics. The focus here is on studies showing different ways in which internet memes have been used for political communication, with a special attention to those that are grounded in semiotics. I then highlight which findings from the mentioned works this thesis develops, as well as where it differs from them.

Chapter two, *Theoretical and Conceptual Framework*, lays out the theory used and the concepts this thesis is built on, as I use the example (and give the context) of Bolsonarism. The chapter is divided into three sections: 2.1. covers *Semiotics of Culture as understood by Tartu-Moscow School*. The next subchapter, 2.2. *Bolsonarism as an Example of Digital Populism*, describes some elements of socialization through social media that is notable in Bolsonarism. Then, subchapter 2.3. delineates the main elements and communicative processes of strategic narratives; hence the title, *Strategic Narratives*. Following is subchapter 2.4, *Strategic Conspiracy Narratives*, which focuses on particular meaning-making strategies behind strategic conspiracy narratives. Methodology (subchapter 2.5) is the last section of Chapter 2. It describes the chosen empirical material: 1) four texts (one academic article, Bolsonaro's inauguration speech and two blog posts) by Mr. Ernesto Araújo, who served as Brazilian Minister of foreign affairs during the first half of Bolsonaro's mandate as president; and 2) 78

anti-China internet memes, which, after narrowing them down through different categories of analysis, resulted in a selection of eight. The analysis of this empirical material 1) is done through using both strategic narrative theory and the framework of strategic conspiracy narratives; while the data set 2) is analysed, through multimodal discourse analysis, using the framework of strategic conspiracy theories.

The third chapter is a brief account of how the Bolsonarist organized digital militia (known in Brazil as the “Cabinet of Hate”) was mobilized during Brazil’s first diplomatic crisis with China.

Finally, the fourth and last chapter is dedicated to the analysis, and is also divided into two parts. The first one is dedicated to Bolsonarist strategic narratives. The second step is an analysis of anti-China internet memes, where I look for the strategic narratives found in the first analysis. By drawing on a framework of digital populism, I elaborate on how strategic narratives can be packed into and unpacked from internet memes.

Before clarifying the concepts and theory that will be used in this thesis, it is necessary to review the previous works on memes as a form of political communication.

## 2. HISTORIOGRAPHY

In this chapter I offer a brief overview of previous studies of memes in the fields of linguistics, narratology, political communication, media studies and semiotics, with a special focus on the latter as well as Brazilian works on the subject.

Internet memes as political communication have been an object of study for the last two decades. One of the first works (Levinger & Lytle 2001) focuses on some widely shared rhetorical patterns used by many nationalist movements to mobilize their supporters: commonly used is the triadic narrative pattern, combining idealized images of the past with exaggerated representations of a decaying present and a harmonious and utopian future. In short, before the Left; a glorious past, the present threatened by the Left, and a future that may still be saved from the Left. For example, Finnish nationalism and multiculturalism are examined by Pettersson and Sakki (2017) using this triad.

Internet memes can also be employed to propagate ideologies and political arguments (Knobel & Lankshear 2007, Yoon 2016). Other studies have treated them as speech acts (Grundlingh 2018), as visual rhetoric (Huntington 2013), as a visual form of hate rhetoric (Hakoköngäs et al. 2018), and as a tool to make political communication viral (Bebić & Volarevic 2018).

Social movements also make use of memes in their communication. The Occupy Wall Street movement provided the empirical material for three academic works, which approached memes as participatory media / polyvocal public discourse (Milner 2013), as visual political rhetoric (Huntington 2016), and as neutralizers of political dissent (Hristova 2019). Moreover, the anonymity of memes and the fact that the responsibility for monitoring social media communication is partly conducted by other users has provided the far-right and other extreme

groups with new opportunities and platforms to disseminate their messages (Hatakka, 2020). More recently, new works have appeared showing how memes are used in information warfare (Greidina 2017; Ascott 2020; Dupuis & Williams 2020).

Gal's (2019) work shows how multimodal messages are used, in Israel, as "boundary objects", to produce a sense of communion and segregation. Her work brings up the role of ironic humor in online communication as a way to empower the in-group and marginalize out-groups. As such, memes are employed to delegitimize dominant practices as well as to legitimize the practices of group members. They make an accessible political tool, as they offer, potentially, a way to reach wide audiences with minimal resources. Moreover, because they spread through networks of users, they can be disseminated without restrictive control. Hence "[...] internet memes are tools to crystallize an argument in an easily shareable, concise, and often visual form (ibid.: 2).

From a semiotic perspective, we find Yopak's (2018) analysis of memes as a post-political communication form, and Kearney's (2019) Peircean framework of memes as participatory culture. In her "Semiotics of Spreadability", Marino (2015) understands memes as spreadable texts. Cannizzaro (2016) draws an approach anchored in the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics of Culture. As such, she understands memes not as units but as relational, they are elements of a constitutive system. This thesis follows Cannizzaro's understanding of memes as "[...] a system of signs with the tendency to take translational habits (ibid: 576). Habit here comes from the Peircean concept of habituescence: a process of education and learning that goes far beyond the boundaries of education institutions and beyond conscious learning process, manifested in online culture and subconscious adoption of attitude and disposition (ibid: 582).

Another approach that this thesis takes into consideration is that of internet memes as partial stories of political narratives (de Saint Laurent et al. 2021), although this work is grounded in narratology and character theory, which is not the focus of this thesis, but its application could be fruitful.

Finally, there is a good number of works on memes done by Brazilian researchers, some on internet memes as political communication in Brazil (Milanezi 2019, de Barros et al. 2019, Chagas 2018). For instance, Chagas et al. (2017) developed a taxonomy for the analysis of content of political internet memes that is a major reference for research in Brazil. Livia Maia Brasil (2017) shows how discourses projected on memes contribute to shaping the representation

of political participation in young voters. One specific work, by Viktor Chagas (2020), analyses internet memes depicting Bolsonaro as different archetypes and reflecting political events in Brazil (Chagas 2021).

This present thesis differs from previous works in a few aspects. For starters, the present work is one of the few works that look at memes as carriers of narratives, particularly strategic (conspiracy) narratives. It uses a framework anchored in the semiotics of culture, with a focus on the Tartu-Moscow School. Finally, it is not a work focused solely on internet memes, but it looks at them through the lenses of the Model Reader / Model Author (Eco 2005), in a groundbreaking framework conceptualized by Madisson & Ventsel (2020)— to aid in understanding the meaning-making strategies behind conspiracy theories. With the framework presented here, it is possible to see memes as tellers of much longer stories.

### 3. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

In this section I describe the concepts used in this work. Cesarino's concepts of Bolsosphere and Science of Populism are grounded in cultural anthropology (Douglas, cybernetics (Bateson), and political philosophy (Laclau, Mouffe) while Madisson and Ventsel's framework of Strategic Conspiracy Narrative draws on strategic narrative theory (as developed by Miskimmon et al. 2014) and semiotics of culture (mainly by Umberto Eco, Juri Lotman and Boris Uspenski), and reflecting the tradition of Tartu-Moscow school.

#### 3.1 Semiotics of Culture as understood by Tartu-Moscow School

In this chapter I apply semiotics of culture, mainly through Juri Lotman and his co-author Boris Uspensky, to show how a peripheral spreader (Olavo de Carvalho) translated elements of the American alt-right and became the core of Bolsonarism. By looking at Bolsonarist media ecology through the model of the semiosphere, I show how Olavo de Carvalho still structures and organizes the projection of Bolsonarist narratives around him.

### 3.1.1 Semiosphere

The semiosphere is a space where semiotic processes take place. The concept of space here can be better understood through the forces driving the process of the semiosphere: boundaries, peripheries, and the core, which will be discussed in further detail later. This spatial reference also applies when we remember that we can conceptualize and manipulate “reality” through sign systems, and that this varies depending on which semiosphere we are *immersed* in. This is because there are several semiospheres, each one “[...] with the potential of self-organization, self-description, and self-regulation, in constant exchange with other semiospheres, in a permanent process of self-transformation resulting in an ongoing growth of signs and culture [...]” (Nöth 2014: 15).

That constant exchange happens at the boundary, which not only delimits where one semiosphere ends and another starts, but instead of being a solid frontier, it resembles more of a membrane that acts like a filter, decoding, exchanging and translating information that was coded in another semiosphere, in a process of separation and union.

Boundary as a mechanism of translation of texts belonging to an alien semiotics into the language of ‘ours,’ a site of transforming the ‘external’ into ‘internal’; it is a filtering membrane that transforms others’ texts to the extent allowing their inscription into... the semiosphere. (Lotman 2005: 211)

The semiosphere is a system that owes its dynamism to the centripetal force, where the elements in the periphery try to penetrate the center, while those in the core resist them, i.e., centrifugal forces. Schönle and Shine (2006) argue that, in Lotman’s theory, culture is essentially both the hegemonic unity and decentredness of power, “[...] for it evidences both centrifugal and centripetal forces, which play themselves out on various, coexisting layers [...]” (ibid: 24).

The semiosphere model is ideal to explain Bolsonarism for a few reasons. First, it works a lot better than concepts such as “bubbles” or “echo chambers”, as it shows that people here are immersed in phenomenon that are not closed or isolated from external influence. It allows us to see how new meanings are generated once alien concepts are translated. The innovation of my model is that it shows how the origins of Bolsonarism can also be found in America, more

specifically in the American alt-right. Last but not least, the Bolsonarist semiosphere maps out the key spreaders (translators) that organize the meaning-making processes and practices among Bolsonaro supporters.

The most important of these key spreaders is Olavo de Carvalho, a peripheral figure in Brazilian journalistic circles due to his staunch anti-communist and conspiratorial writings. He moved to the United States after Lula, from the Workers Party, won the 2002 presidential elections. There he was in contact with a peripheral political discourse in American politics—the alt-right. Soon he would incorporate alt-right ideas and methods into his teaching, making heavy use of social media, applying and promoting trolling techniques and translating conspiracy theories from the USA to Brazil. This boundary work started generating new meanings for Brazilians audiences and the *Olavist* package (conspiratorial thinking, binary modelling of the world and a hostile approach towards the other) began shaping the culture of a emerging New Brazilian Right, which is carried out by the most radicals among the Bolsonarists—the president and his sons included.

### 3.1.2 Boundary and the other

As mentioned in the subchapter “Semiosphere”, the boundary has a key role in generating new meaning. The boundary is the most important functional and structural position of semiotic space that determines the nature of its meaning mechanism, as it translating external messages into an internal language and vice versa (Lotman 2005: 208-2009). Functioning as generators, organizers and carriers of meanings, boundaries are also attributes of power (Schöpflin 2010, 65).

Since one of the primary mechanisms of semiotic individuation is the boundary, “our side” tends to be characterized as “ours,” “my own,” “cultured,” and “safe,” while “their space” is “other,” “hostile,” “dangerous,” “chaotic” (Lotman 1990, 131). Binary thinking does not consider the relative equality of the concerned parties, which in turn does not lead even to the mere acknowledgment and right of the opponent’s existence (Lotman 2007, 26, cited in Madisson & Ventsel 2016: 333). Madisson and Ventsel (2020: 11-13) explain how, from the perspective of semiotics, conflict is determined through the boundary or translation mechanism.

### 3.1.3 *Self-Description*: who is “we”, who is “they” among Bolsonaroists

The need for self-description is considered as “[t]he most universal feature of human cultures [...]” (Salupere, Torop 2013: 25). My application of the semiosphere to the model of this thesis considers the central role that self-description has in, in, articulating and establishing the boundaries of semiotic units (Madisson 2016), the element that organizes and regulates, hierchally, the core of the Bolsonaroist semiosphere, and, consequently, its boundary.

In Lotman’s words, “[...] the system, passing through the stage of self-description, undergoes changes: assigning to itself clear boundaries and a considerably higher degree of unification. [...] The self-description of culture makes a boundary of the fact of its self-consciousness” (Lotman 2009: 172). Many authors consider that the anti-Workers Party sentiment was an aggregator that brought together different collectives forming the “new Brazilian right” (Telles 2015, Messenberg 2017), which would result in the election of Bolsonaro (Parzianello 2019). By making the Workers Party the other, the “we” was shaped, as the success of the political discourse happens when the deconstruction of the other is set [in motion] and in the way that it constructs itself, which acts as the opposition to the other (Parzianello 2019).

Self-description is related to the need of culture to create a model of itself (and for itself) in order to organize itself hierarchically, by canonizing some texts and eliminating the others (Lotman 2020: 94.). Using the semiosphere model, we find self-descriptions being developed in core structures, where meta-descriptions are used to describe themselves and the periphery (Lotman 2005: 213). Bolsonaro finished his speech at the 75th UN’s General Assembly with a statement: “Brazil is a Christian and conservative country, and has the family at its base [...]”<sup>11</sup>, showing that the 13% of Brazilians who do not identify themselves as Christians are excluded from the Bolsonaroist semiosphere.

In terms of semiotics of culture, meta-structural self-descriptors, such as grammars, enhance “[...] the rigidity of the structure and slow down its development” (Lotman 2005: 214). An inclination for standardization and self-description is connected with the mechanism of

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<https://gazetabrasil.com.br/especiais/jair-bolsonaro/bolsonaro-o-brasil-e-um-pais-cristao-e-conservador-e-tem-na-familia-sua-base/>

identification and elimination of differences (Lotman 1988: 35), which is manifested while this ideal unity is constantly challenged by the periphery, constituting the roots of cultural dynamics (Lotman 2005: 213).

Albeit conceptualized with cultural identification in mind, the concept of self-description is a fertile one for analysing identity creation, as it sets the boundaries, centralizes the core descriptors and hierarchically defines the structure of the semiosphere. According to Monticelli (2012: 66), self-description offers a general theoretical characterization of socio-cultural separation, closing and excluding operations. Many Twitter profiles of Bolsonaro supporters commonly show “about me” (self-descriptions) such as “Brazilian, patriot, conservative, capitalist [...]”, others are complemented with “[...] ‘anti-communist’, ‘non-politically correct’, and/or ‘against abortion’”.

Lotman and Uspenski went further to develop a typology of how cultures describe themselves: either mainly towards content (as a system of grammars), or largely towards expression (as a collection of established texts or habits) (Lotman, Uspenski 1978: 217, Lotman, Uspenski 1978: 217). The first type, called eccentric culture, acknowledges itself as a system of rules and uses “organized-unorganized” as its basic structural opposition. It is a culture that is open to external contacts (Monticelli 2008: 281, cited in Madisson 2016: 208) and communication, thanks to its gradual boundary between inner and outer structures, which speed up cultural processes and facilitates the renewal and transformation of existing forms (Monticelli 2008: 281, cited in Madisson 2016:208). The second type is called concentric culture, and since Bolsonarism can be expressed as an example of this culture, it deserves its own subchapter.

#### 3.1.4 *Concentric culture*: Bolsonarism as a culture focused on expression

The second type, called concentric culture, acknowledges itself as a collection of established texts. It uses “correct-incorrect” as its basic structural opposition, where incorrect is understood as wrong, bringing it close and even overlapping with the opposition “true-false”. Here culture is not the opposition of chaos (entropy), but preceded by a negative sign—anticulture (Lotman, Uspenski 1978: 217). The Bolsonarist self-description calls out for an established code texts that

existed before Bolsonaro: “An international communist plot to destroy the nation”. This conspiracy theory, which can be traced back to the 1920s, has surfaced in times of political crisis, contributing to the three political shifts in Brazilian history.

The boundary between inner and outer structures for this kind of culture is hard and fast. “In other words, anticulture is constructed here isomorphically to culture, in its own image: it too is understood as a sign system having its own expression. One can say that anticulture is perceived as culture with a negative sign, as a mirror image of culture (where the ties are not broken but are replaced by their opposites) (Lotman, Uspenski 1978: 217). This binary logic interprets significant cultural changes as signs of the beginning era of prosperity or disaster. The Bolsonarist semiosphere is an example of concentric culture. It presents itself as a mirror image of elements associated with the Left (“the Communist”) in general, or the Workers Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* - PT) or in particular. For Bolsonarists, PT “destroyed Brazil”, Bolsonaro brought upon a new era, and now he needs to stand his ground before Brazil succumbs to China’s plan to control a decaying West.

This type of culture expresses its self-description alongside an idea of complete and unconditional destruction of existing developments and the apocalyptic generation of the new, even when empirical studies reveal multiple and gradual processes (Lotman 2009: 173). Bolsonaro declared “I always dreamed of liberating Brazil from the nefarious ideology of the left [...] We have to deconstruct many things, undo many things, before starting to do others. I am happy to be the turning point<sup>12</sup>”.

Self-descriptions with this tendency move towards closing the culture and separating it from the outer space (beyond the boundary), which is perceived as hostile, a threat. Lotman has pointed out that binary thinking does not even consider the relative equality of the concerned parties. Even if acknowledging such equality may not mean admitting the opponent’s right to the truth, it would at least mean admitting its right to existence (Lotman 2007: 26). During the election campaign, and already as president, Bolsonaro vowed to “eliminate the Left” several times, calling it “parasites”, “cancer”, etc. The semiotic systems that rely on this model are primarily oriented towards autocommunication (Lepik 2007: 78). This is evident in the constant mobilization of Bolsonarists, who are encouraged to block and ignore the leftists, who represent in whatever form the imminent threat posed by the “communists”.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/20191221-bolsonaro-a-year-of-anti-establishment-uproar-in-brazil>

## 3.2 Bolsonarism as an Example of Digital Populism

Considering Bolsonarism as a concentric culture with a strong online presence, the next subchapters will draw on some of its main characteristics. For the purposes of this thesis, I borrow two concepts from Brazilian anthropologist Leticia Cesarino, who has been doing online ethnography in Bolsonarist WhatsApp groups since 2018. Then, to understand the logic that unites media outlets, politicians and voters, concepts like propaganda feedback loop and conspiracy cascades will be introduced.

### 3.2.1 Bolsosphere and the “Cabinet of Hate”

*Bolsoesfera* (Bolsosphere), coined by Cesarino (2019) to explain the patterns that rule the digital universe of Bolsonaro’s campaign, particularly on WhatsApp<sup>13</sup>. According to her, the structure of the “Bolsosphere” consists of four layers: the first layer already existed and had a digital mobilization before the 2018 election campaign (Bolsonaro’s second son, Carlos, has been credited as one of the key strategists at the top of the pyramid). The second layer is *ex officio* and is formed by the support networks on WhatsApp with content shared unilaterally by the administrators, serving as a daily source of new content and as an immediate answer to the events happening both online and offline. The next layer is the big (often public) groups with 256 members (the limit imposed by the platform), who share information (often distorted or fake) with other groups and coordinate digital and street actions. The last layer is made of personal groups, safe spaces of communication, and mobilization related to the campaign. Her analysis of this media ecosystem indicates that everything that was circulated on Facebook and

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<sup>13</sup> It is important to point out that she noticed this structure before it came public that in fact there is a structured hierarchy creating content and coordinating WhatsApp groups, commonly known in Brazil as the “Cabinet of Hatred”, linked to Bolsonaro, his sons and their staff. For more read <https://medium.com/dfrlab/facebook-removes-inauthentic-network-linked-to-bolsonaro-allies-5927b0ae750d>

Twitter appeared first on WhatsApp. This “Bolsosphere” skillfully attracted sympathizers willing to spontaneously replicate the content from the candidate. Many of these sympathizers were already immersed in these networks that have been articulated long before the political campaign, and many others remained after the elections. Later on, through investigations on the dissemination of fake news (one in Parliament and one in the Supreme Court), and confirmed by a report by Facebook, we learned that the Bolsosphere continues to operate under the staff of Bolsonaro and his sons. In Brazil it is widely known as the “Cabinet of Hate”, a central coordination with Carlos and Eduardo Bolsonaro at the top.<sup>14</sup> Their (des)information campaigns are often followed by the “digital militias”, a group of key spreaders / digital influencers / media pundits. In Chapter 3, I provide an example of how they operate.

### 3.2.2 Main characteristics of Bolsonaro’s digital populism

Cesarino (2019a) draws her research from a qualitative, online ethnographic point of view, and describes what she calls “science of populism”, which is based on five rules that guided the content production in pro-Bolsonaro online networks during the 2018 election campaign—which, this thesis claims, still apply to Bolsonarist internet meme creation.

She points out the main metalinguistic axis that make up the Bolsonarist memetic patterns, which reflect what Laclau (2005) called the axis of difference (drawing an antagonistic division between friend and enemy) and the axis of equivalence (drawing a contiguity between leader and “people”) (Cesarino 2019a). She concluded that the online content (short texts, internet memes, images, etc.), circulating throughout the Bolsosphere, operated as a “[...] complexity reduction mechanism, drawing a rigid inside-outside group frontier; they recurred at multiple scales; and they were efficacious in producing and stabilizing the ‘people’ through a double, syntagmatic (we-them opposition) and paradigmatic (leader-people) axis” (Cesarino 2019a: 3).

Besides the two discursive functions above, she identified three others, which make up for the “five rules” listed below. From the massive universe of digital content circulating in

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-disinformation-brazil-idUSKBN2492Y5>

pro-Bolsonaro WhatsApp groups, all of the material there could be classified in terms of one or more of the following five basic functions:

1. Create a binary exclusive division: friend versus enemy, “we” versus “them”;
2. Produce a “we”, a continuity between charismatic leadership and “people”;
3. Establish an atmosphere of constant threat connected to the enemy, through conspiratory or alarmistic messages (hence maintaining the mobilization);
4. Show an inverted mirror of the enemy and turn the opponents’ accusations around;
5. Create a direct and exclusive channel of communication between leadership and its public, through the delegitimization of instances of production of authorized knowledge in the public sphere such as the press and academia.

The author points out how these patterns systematically structured discourse at the meta-communicative level of form rather than content. She borrows the concept of deuterio-learning (Bateson 1972) to claim that such discursive patterns are intuitively reproduced by those inside these groups, as they “[...] become part of users’ very cognitive framing and political subjectivities - how they literally come to see the world, and act upon it” (Cesarino 2019a: 3). Another important element in this online content creation is the demarcation of a dangerous outside, to borrow the concept from Mary Douglas (1966) of group formation and symbolic classification along a pure-impure axis<sup>15</sup>, which can be found in the mobilization of affect-loaded images and evocations shared throughout these online groups.

### 3.2.3 Propaganda Feedback Loop and Conspiracy Cascades

Benkler et al. (2018) describe the phenomenon of propaganda feedback loop in the United States, but it could perfectly be applied to the (recent) Bolsonarist media outlets<sup>16</sup>, some of them formed

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<sup>15</sup> Dirty-clean; repugnant-virtuous; corrupt-righteous; good-evil, to name a few. This is one of the most common features in the Bolsonarist discourse. This will be evident with the analysis of the internet memes.

<sup>16</sup> In the U.S. Trump has FOX as a media ally, Bolsonaro has RECORD, owned by Evangelical Bishop Edir Macedo. The American case shows different radio hosts, conspiracy theorists and conservative

during the campaign, most of which now receive the biggest chunk of funds for government ads: they emphasize partisan-confirming news over truth, thus reducing the discomfort of segments of the public by telling them not to trust the outlets that provide disconfirming news. Those who seek confirmation more than truth will reward this outlet with attention (which in the case of social media is necessary to sell its ads). As some politicians want the votes of those audiences, they end up seeking those outlets. Now the members of the public have media outlets and politicians confirming their prior beliefs and telling them that the media that contradicts what is said and believed are themselves biased and hence untrustworthy. The result is that those who buy into this reduce their levels of trust in other media. These audiences develop confidence that the partisan good news they hear is true, and that the conflicting news from other outlets is false, thus reducing the psychological cost of consuming only the bias-confirming outlets. A politician who wants to succeed in such a media ecosystem will align his/her positions and narratives with publics who are like-minded and media sources that are supportive, or will adapt the narrative towards what the public and media would want to follow.

What is formed from this process is a joint negotiation—by (political) elites, partisan media, pundits, and political activists—of partisan talking points, interpretations of real-world events, and ideological positions. At this point these news media do not distinguish news from opinion, and “[...] compete by policing each other for deviance from identity confirmation, not truth” (ibid: 78). These media outlets adjust their coverage of politicians to offer a favorable view of the identity-confirming ones, while those who deviate from identity confirmation, not truth, receive attacks. The result is a “[...] steady flow of identity-confirming news” (ibid) to audiences who consume these media outlets precisely for that, and who no longer believe the external “lying” media. Incumbent politicians cannot fully rely on the mainstream media to challenge what a politician focused on, bias-confirming says. The same trade-offs between truth and bias confirmation also apply to challengers within the party. The result of this dynamic is a trade that benefits everyone: the audiences get the psychological reward of identity confirmation, media outlets get their attention (which is translated into advertising revenue), and politicians get the votes. The authors call this dynamic the “propaganda feedback loop”, because “[...] once it is set in motion the media, elites, and the public are all participants in a self-reinforcing feedback

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youtubers supporting Trump since the election campaign, while very similar people in Brazil have filled the ranks of Bolsonaro’s supporters.

loop that disciplines those who try to step off it with lower attention or votes, and gradually over time increases the costs to every one of introducing news that is not identity confirming, or challenges the partisan narratives and frames” (ibid: 79).

By analyzing the results of opinion polls in the US, the authors claim that “[...]audiences in this loop will exhibit high trust in identity-confirming media, and low trust in external media” (ibid). The same can be seen in Brazil, where constant attacks towards *Globo* and *Folha* (Brazil’s leading TV channel and newspaper, respectively) are spearheaded by Bolsonaro<sup>17</sup>, and reinforced daily by his allies, voters, and followers. On the other hand, the second and third largest TV channels, *SBT* and *Record* (the former declared support to the president and the latter helped the candidate during the elections) are praised. Record is also known as the “channel of the Evangelicals” as it is owned by neo-Pentecostal bishop Edir Macedo. They were rewarded by the Special Secretary of Social Communication, the agency that is responsible for the contracts of publicity with the federal government, which in 2019 had a budget of R\$ 150 million (€ 23,5 million, approximately). Globo’s share in federal contracts dropped from 39% to 16%, while Record’s rose from 31% to 43%, and SBT’s from 30% to 41%<sup>18</sup>.

Bolsonarist online media has been receiving federal government funds through Google AdSense, among them, the *Jornal da Cidade Online*, which has been sued and sentenced to pay indemnifications for distorted and false news, and was also the most popular source of news shared among right-wing (mainly Bolsonarist) WhatsApp groups during the 2018 elections (Bursztyń & Birnbaum 2019). Another media outlet was *Terça Livre*, owned by the Bolsonarist blogger Alan dos Santos, who is being investigated by the federal police and is currently a fugitive in the United States. At one of the hearings of the Parliamentary Inquiry on Fake News, Alan dos Santos denied ever received public funds, but in a period between 06/06/2019 and 13/07/2019 his youtube channel received 1447 ads with federal government publicity<sup>19</sup>. His *Terça Livre* is one of the biggest depositories of conspiracy theories.

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<sup>17</sup> A leaked audio shows Bolsonaro reprimanding his minister of secretariat general, Gustavo Bebbiano, for bringing “the enemy” Globo into the presidential palace for an interview.  
<https://www.metropoles.com/brasil/politica-brasil/globo-se-posiciona-apos-bolsonaro-declarar-emissora-inimiga-do-governo>

<sup>18</sup>

<https://www.terra.com.br/diversao/tv/blog-sala-de-tv/bolsonaro-faz-inimiga-globo-deixar-de-ganhar-r-400-milhoes,058c262feeb67484255362830ddece0fwz9mkfvr.html>

<sup>19</sup>

<https://www.dw.com/pt-br/governo-destina-verba-publicit%C3%A1ria-a-canais-de-conte%C3%BAdo-inadequado/a-53675853>

Another approach to the idea of feedback loop is presented by Sustain & Vermeule (2009) in their study of how conspiracy theories arise and spread. They expand the concept of conspiracy cascades, by pointing out their four elements: information, reputation, availability and emotions.

Conspiracy theories are accepted at first by people with low thresholds for its acceptance, but as the informational pressure increases and more people begin accepting them, those with higher thresholds start accepting them too. Reputation plays a role in which people who seek being accepted as part of the group will “[...] squelch their own doubts in order to avoid social sanctions” (ibid: 215). Once a particular event becomes available, “conspiracy theorists” will show up to both explain it and use it as a part of a larger conspiracy narrative, attracting the following of those who can fit this one event into the larger narrative they already subscribe to. Finally, anger and fear make people more likely to focus on rumors and pass them along, especially when those rumors trigger intense feelings, to the point of eventually generating an “emotional snowballing”—an out of control selection of emotional content instead of information (ibid: 216).

The authors also point out the phenomenon of group polarization linked to cascades: people often end up in a more extreme position after going through cascades, which happens particularly when “[...] people have a shared sense of identity and are connected by bonds of solidarity” (ibid: 217). Finally—just like the Bolsonarist semiosphere shows—the combination of cascades and polarization will move the group’s median view towards a direction that not everyone will agree with, resulting in the departure of doubters and halfway-believers while the intense believers dig their heels into the group’s narrative. As a result the group may shrink, but the remaining members will display more fanaticism. It is not uncommon to witness members practicing self-segregation, in terms of space or information, in an attempt to shield their beliefs from the contestation by outsiders, or even to see group leaders calling for insulation by the members of the group to avoid exposure to information or arguments that would challenge the leader’s grip on the group.

There has been some criticism on the concepts of echo chamber and filter bubble, mainly spearheaded by Axel Bruns (2019), who considers them an expression of technological/media determinism. He proposes that “echo chambers” and “filter bubbles”, pointing that the former represents patterns of connection while the later expresses practices of communication, and as

such both should have their use limited to social media contexts. Still, he claims that both “[...] metaphors tend to misrepresent the connective and communicative patterns they describe as symptomatic of users’ entire experience of social media platforms, rather than as only one aspect of a much more diverse range of encounters” (2019: 7). In other words, people are not completely isolated from contrary information and not entirely disconnected from people who think differently. Bruns argue that those metaphors attempt to make technology responsible for societal problems: polarization is a social issue, not a technological one.

### 3.3 Strategic Narratives

Strategic narratives are “a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors” (Miskimmon et al. 2017: 6). I use this framework here because it structures narratives in a way that we can see the strategy behind them. In the case of Bolsonarist narratives about China, we can identify not only the elements that make them such, but, moreover, how they drive audiences to act or behave according to their purpose.

A strategic narrative contains five components: 1) Character or actors (agent); 2) Setting / environment / space (scene); 3) Conflict or action (act); 4) Tools / behaviour (agency); and 5) Resolution / or suggested resolution / goal (purpose), however it is important to understand “the relationship between them in a dynamic way rather than in rote categorization of component parts” (Miskimmon et al. 2017: 7). This structure allows for an identification of actors and actions and, while the explanation of the setting, action and goal recognizes the importance of temporality: the past (history), the present (where “we” are now), and the future (where are “we” going).

There are three types of strategic narratives: 1) international system narratives (describing how the world is structured); 2) identity narrative (the story of a political actor, its values and goals); and 3) policy narratives (why a policy is needed and how it will be accomplished). Finally, there is the communicative process, how the strategic narrative is formed, projected and received.

Considering that strategic narratives are part of a communicative process, the concept elaborated by Miskimmon et al. focuses on how they are formed, projected and received. Formation describes how narratives are formed, the role of political actors in their construction and through which institutions and procedures they are agreed upon. Projection conveys the ways in which narratives are projected (or narrated) and contested, “particularly in a new media environment” (ibid: 9). Finally, reception addresses how narratives are received, their reach (or saturation); it “happens in social contexts where narratives may be discussed socially as well as processed individually”.

### 3.4 Strategic Conspiracy Narratives

Madisson and Ventsel (2020) develop the concept of strategic narratives further by giving it a semiotic approach and focusing on conspiracy theories. While grounded on the original theory by Miskimmon et al., the authors frame the components of conspiracy theories as “[...] antagonists, protagonists, concrete goals and activities making reaching those goals possible, spatial and temporal relationships, etc.” (ibid: 4). They understand the central role of conflict in conspiracy theories, and thus dedicate a semiotic approach to it, which is heavily grounded in the culture semiotics from the tradition of the Tartu-Moscow school, with theory by Juri Lotman, as well as Umberto Eco’s conception of the Model Reader and Model Author. Considering that Bolsonaro’s foreign policy is based on a perceived conflict between traditionalism (“we”) and globalism (“them”), anchored in the code text of the conspiracy theory of the communist threat, I find it appropriate to use Madisson and Ventsel’s framework to this thesis, in particular regarding the conflict as the topic and the meaning-making behind the modelling of Bolsonarist strategic narratives about China.

### 3.4.1 Model Reader & Model Author

For Madisson and Ventsel (2020), Umberto Eco's (2005) concept of the Model Reader "[...] allows the researcher to study which semiotic strategies have been used in constructing the audiences targeted in the strategic conspiracy narratives, as well as the unity of the aims the narrative pursues" (Madisson and Ventsel 2020: 4). Eco's methodology also allows the analysis of the self-image of the sender, i.e., the Model Author, which "[...] becomes particularly relevant in cases when the author's position has not been presented explicitly (e.g., deictically, using the first person singular), but is revealed through mediated discourses (ibid: 26). In their model, both the actual creator of narratives and the social media users who develop the narrative further—the narrative magnifiers as they call them, or projectors in Miskimmon's terms— and make up a single Model Author, "[...]whose unity becomes apparent via detecting the aims that they seek to meet" (ibid: 30).

In a model of author - text - recipient, a "(successful) communication presumes that the communication partners have a common component in their memories" (ibid: 25). For Eco, the recipient operates the interpretation of the text through semantic, syntactic, codes, by using meanings previously known, and by linking different parts of the text and creating intertextual links with other texts known to them. Thus the author consciously writes into the text "the unsaid" with what is said, leaving for the reader the activity of reading that "unsaid" (Eco 2005, 57-58). The "unsaid" can be composed of what is taken for granted by the culture shared by sender and receiver, but also tap into codes known only to a limited group who can unpack the full meaning potential of the text, while those not familiar with the code only interpret parts of the text. The message thus meets the sender's desired aims when its interpretation is "part of its generation mechanism: to generate a text means to trigger a strategy a component of which is foreseeing the other party's moves" (ibid: 61).

Although Madisson and Ventsel's (2020) application of Eco's Model Reader and Model Author was for the "coding" and "decoding" of conspiracy theories, this thesis recognizes the parallels with "packing" and "unpacking" strategic narratives in/from internet memes. For the discursive strategies of the Model Reader to be actualized, the reader has to relate to a system of codes, subcodes and other semiotic conditions, which include:

- *A basic dictionary* that makes out the elementary semantic qualities of expressions, that operate as minimal meaning postulates or implication rules (Eco 2005, 84, cited in Madisson & Ventsel 2020: 27). In the context of this thesis, the importance lies in the choice of words (and visual signs) that starts to direct the interpretation strategy.
- *Rhetorical and stylistic hyper-encoding* (Eco 2005: 85, cited in Madisson & Ventsel 2020: 27), allowing the reader to detect both figurative expressions and those with specific stylistic connotation. With the target group in mind, the strategic narrative should include references to its peculiarities in the use of the language (including slang, metaphors, expressions), and its expectations related to how bold the speech is, how its opponents are represented, etc.
- *Inferences of ordinary scenarios that determine a certain framework of action for participants in narrative* (Eco 2005: 86, cited in Madisson & Ventsel 2020: 28). Framing organizes elements of cognitive knowledge and representations of the “world” that allows the realization of basic cognitive acts, such as the act of perception, linguistic understanding and activities (van Dijk 1998).
- *Inferences of intertextual scenarios*, related to the reader’s previous reading experience and familiarity with genres that the author of the text has to take into consideration when constructing the Model Reader (Eco 2005, 88, cited in Madisson & Ventsel 2020: 28 ). According to Madisson and Ventsel (2020: 28), “[...] exploiting the foundational plots from the cultural memory in the formation of strategic narrative potentially increases the latter’s success in finding recognition with audiences, particularly as concerns communication on social media, and in including the audience in creating and disseminating subnarratives that support the main narrative”.
- *Ideological hypercoding*, allowing for the narrative to shape the Model Reader’s ideological eventuality that will consider the empirical reader’s ideological views (Eco 2005: 92, cited in Madisson & Ventsel 2020: 95).

In Eco’s model, the focus is not so much in the author’s real intention, but rather the intentions expressed in the text. In Madisson and Ventsel’s model, real creators of a narrative and “narrative magnifiers” (social media users developing the narrative further) make up a single Model Author.

### 3.4.2 Conflict as the topic

Central to Madisson and Ventsel's (2020: 5) framework is the question of conflict construction between the own and the alien, which they treat in the framework of cultural semiotics (modelling the relations of *culture-anti-culture*, *culture-non-culture*) (Loman, Uspenskij 1978), Laclau's (2005) theory of hegemony, Mouffe's (2005) notion of *agonistic logic* and Foucault's (1980) notion of *subjugated knowledge*: "From the perspective of meaning-making conflict functions as the center - the topic - of the conspiracy narrative" (Madisson & Ventsel 2020: 52).

As it will be shown in the analysis of internet memes about China, the topic is not necessarily explicit in the text, but it is rather created by the reader in their reception of the text, thus guiding their path of interpretation. According to Eco (2005: 95, cited in Madisson & Ventsel 2020: 52), one of the main functions of the topic is to delimit, or rather, discipline the process of interpretation, but it also operates as a guide of smaller text parts and discursive structures, which "[...] need to be actualised in the light of the hypothesis made regarding the topic or the topics" (ibid: 94, cited in Madisson & Ventsel 2020: 52). Madisson and Ventsel (2020: 54-55) remind us that conspiracy narratives contain, besides a fundamental conflict, a series of other conflicts—their subtopics—that are of more local importance. These subconflicts reflect the socio-cultural background where they are articulated. Both levels of analysis in this thesis will show that, whether it's China's role in the globalist narrative, or how internet memes depict Bolsonaro's political opponents, they are both depicted in relation to China.

### 3.4.3. Meaning-making on the basis of the code text of conspiracy theories

Another concept by Lotman (1988), the code text, is a textual system that has the collective memory of a particular community in its origin. It functions as a specific meaning-making template, or an interlink, a textual system with a rigid syntactic order. Its different signs can be

split into various sub-structures, yet the code text remains unambiguous “[...] for itself”: from the standpoint of its own level, the sign is something invested not only with a unity of expression but also with a unity of content” (Lotman 1988b: 35; see Madisson 2014: 292; Madisson 2016a: 201). In their works, Madisson and Ventsel (see Madisson 2014; Madisson 2016b; Ventsel 2016a; Madisson & Ventsel 2020) have been developing a cultural semiotic model that explains how code text is an invariant mechanism of meaning-making common to all conspiracy narratives.

Conspiracy narratives possess a strong modelling capacity that makes it possible for them to embrace events from different points and space, resulting in a synthetic whole with symbols and sources that, at first sight, seem totally incompatible. By connecting strong meanings in a way that can be easily perceived, they offer a shortcut, hence, apparently, “[...] why conspiracy theories have become especially valued in these contemporary times of information overload” (Madisson & Ventesel 2020: 43). They connect various tragic events, villains, through hiding and secret plots. Yet, if intriguing hints pointing to a moment are woven into them, they can still catch the attention of the interpreters, as they are already familiar with the components that are repeated from one conspiracy theory to another. Events, signs and people can be newly woven into the patchwork of the conspiracy theory, the whole that these can always be a part of. Hence, two of the main characteristics of the model of meaning-making based on the code text of conspiracy theories are:

- *Discrete and non-discrete logic of code-textual meaning making.* The sketching of discrete meaning relations is always submitted to the non-discrete logic of signification that is associative and based on analogies (Madisson & Ventsel 2020: 45). In other words, the interpreter identifies signs of conspiracies when learning about a single event or new piece of information, drawing parallels and creating connections;
- *Binary modelling of the world*, i.e., a tendency to divide it into agents of Good and Evil. “As a rule, conspiracy theories sketch a conflict in which the opponent is perceived as corrupt and immoral so that entering a dialogue or reaching a compromise with them is in principle excluded” (ibid: 46)

These concepts will guide the analysis of the meaning-making mechanisms behind the strategic narrative of globalism, which draws from the code text of the “Red Menace” which has been around in Brazil for the last 100 years.

## 3.5 Methodology

In this section I explain the methods of data collection and justify my selection of 1) statements by government officials in charge of Brazil’s foreign policy, as well as 2) the internet memes expressing anti-China views. I then proceed to elaborate the methodological approach, showing the analytical tools applied to the collected data.

### 3.5.1. Data collection - Bolsonaroist strategic narratives about China

To answer the first research question—*What are the Bolsonaroist strategic narratives about China?*—I applied strategic narrative theory, looking for agents, scenes, acts, agency and purpose in four articles published by former Minister of Foreign Relations, Ernesto Araujo (mandate 02/01/2019 - 29/03/2021), as well as his inauguration speech. I selected these texts guided by the principle that it is important to analyse his discourse over time, hence why there is one for each year, since the 2017 publication that projected him into Bolsonaroism, until the 2021 one where he presents an overview of his mandate after stepping down, on 28/03/2021. The five texts are:

- “*Trump and the West*” (“Trump e o Ocidente”), article published (Araújo 2017), in the Journal of Foreign Policy (*Cadernos de Política Exterior*), a publication by the foundation (FUNAG) subordinated to the Ministry of Foreign Relations. Several

journalists and political analysts in Brazil consider this article to be Araujo's ticket to the Ministry<sup>20</sup>.

- “*Transmission Line*” (“Linha de Transmissão”), post (Araújo 2018) published on his blog *Metapolitics - Against Globalism*<sup>21</sup> (Metapolítica - Contra o Globalismo), on 27/09/2018 (10 days before the first round of the 2018 elections). It is the shortest of all his posts, but with many categories of analysis used in this thesis.
- *Inauguration speech - Minister of Foreign Relations Ernesto Araújo* (Araújo 2019), given on 02/01/2019, in Brasília.
- “*The Communavirus has arrived*” (“Chegou o Comunavírus”), post published by Minister Ernesto Araújo (Araújo 2020) on his blog on 22/04/2020, where he reviewed Slavoj Žižek's book *Pandemic!*
- “*An Itamaraty for Brazil's freedom and greatness: management report*” (“Um Itamaraty pela liberdade e grandeza do Brasil: balanço de gestão”) (Araújo 2021), also published on his blog, on 10/04/2021, laying out his actions, perceptions and motivations guiding his conduction of Brazil's foreign policy.

The focus on this first analysis is on strategic narratives of 1) identity: the story, values and goals of Brazil, and its relationship with China; as well as 2) systems: how the world is structured, how the system works, who the players are, and what is Brazil's place in it. Special attention is given to the meaning-making mechanisms behind the crafting of these narratives (Model Author behind the Formation) and how the audiences (Model Reader or Reception) interpret it, connecting what is not said into the main narrative.

One important note to make is that, unless indicated otherwise, all quotations (originally in Portuguese) extracted from the empirical material are translated by the author of this thesis.

### 3.5.2 Data Collection - Anti-China internet memes circulating in Brazil

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<sup>20</sup> <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/materia/o-chanceler-do-regresso/>

<sup>21</sup> [www.metapoliticabrasil.com](http://www.metapoliticabrasil.com)

The next step then is to look for the strategic narratives, resulting from the previous analysis, that can be found in internet memes circulating in Brazil. In order to answer the second research question—*How are Bolsonaroist strategic narratives about China reflected in internet memes?*—I collected a second set of data memes on China posted on three social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) under five hashtags. My selection of hashtags included calls to action (“say no to China”, “boycott China”, “trade block”), blatant hate (S.O.B) and referencing China as a dictatorship, a common reference among Bolsonaroists. Originally another hashtag that was going to be used was #ChineseVirus (*#VirusChinês*), promoted by key spreaders of Bolsonaroism on Twitter during the first diplomatic crisis between Brazil in China, triggered by Eduardo Bolsonaro’s tweet (this event is described in the subchapter *Bolsosphere against China*). But some of these spreaders had their accounts suspended for promoting attacks on the Supreme Court and the closing of the National Congress. I then decided to not include #ChineseVirus as I intend to find memes that covered other aspects behind anti-China sentiment, even without #ChineseVirus, a good number of the memes make reference to the pandemic. The hashtags used were:

- #SayNotoChina (*#DigaNãooàChina* and all the the variants without the accents);
- #BoycottChina (*#BoicoteaChina* and *#BoicoteàChina*);
- #ChineseTradeBlockNow (*#BloqueioComercialChinêsJá* and all the variants without the accents)
- #ChinaSOB (*#ChinaFDP*)
- #ChineseDictatorship (*#DitaduraChinesa*)

The result was 78 internet memes. I created a set of categories that tried to encompass all of the ways in which China is visually and semantically represented in the analyzed memes. In order to classify them and to narrow them down to a feasible number that can be analyzed thoroughly, I classified them according to five categories, based on Cesarino’s (2019a) science of populism, the propaganda feedback loop (Benkler et. al. 2018), strategic conspiracy narrative (Madisson & Ventsel 2020) and Chagas’ (2021) analysis of how Bolsonaro is portrayed in internet memes. The main focuses of analysis are: how many of these memes are created by those inside the propaganda feedback loop (authorship); how China (actor) is represented through key signifiers

(representation); how the conflict is constructed (act); attribution of agency to Brazilian elements (used as tools / their behavior); and the usage of tropes, allowing the reader to connect China to the image of something that has to be stopped or even eliminated (purpose).

The first category of analysis is non-excludent and refers to authorship. Considering that China plays a role in the identity-confirmation of Bolsonarism, and that Brazilian memes are part of political communication, it is expected that those in the propaganda feedback loop (voters-media-politicians) will cater for the reward brought by identity confirmation. Members of Congress and state representatives, particularly those from Bolsonaro's former party, PSL (but not the only ones), post professionally crafted political memes, marking them with their names, pictures, social media handles and, at times, the logo of the media outlet the news comes from. Noticeable is the logo or "signature" of conservative groups as well, such as "Conservative Women from Ceará" (a Brazilian state), "Conservative Blacks", organized social movements such as "Move Forward Brasil", or simply popular conservative social media influencers, some of them running for municipal elections (one of them actually was elected in 2020). It turns out that four out of the six people "signing" anti-China memes were students of Olavo de Carvalho, according to a BBC Brasil report<sup>22</sup>. Table 1. illustrates who created or shared the internet meme.

**Table 1 - Authorship of the analyzed memes**

Authorship	Number (out of 78)
Unknown	43
Memes by social media influencers	5
Memes by politicians	16
Memes by media outlet	8
Memes by social / organized groups	6
Total	78

The second category is concerned with an objective nature, non-excludent, and tries to capture visual (and verbal) references attributed to China, such as the Chinese flag, Chinese currency (Yuan bills), Chinese military, Chinese president Xi Jinping, PCC (the acronym in Portuguese for

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-46802265>

the Chinese Communist Party—CCP), references to communism (hammer and sickle, red star), red color, as well as racist references (such as pulled eyes, changing the letter “R” for “L”, “eating an ‘inappropriate’ animal”). Many memes show more than one reference in a meme. Table 2. shows which references are made to China in the meme.

**Table 2 - References to China**

References to China	N (out of 78)
Chinese flag	24
Chinese currency	2
Chinese military	1
President Xi Jinping	34
Ambassador Yang Wanming	2
CCP	8
References to communism (☙, red star, “communism”, “communist”)	26
Red color	22
Racist references	12
Only verbal reference to China or Xi Jinping	1
No visual or verbal reference to China	10

The third category is about how China’s action is represented in the memes. Table 3. shows what China (or Xi Jinping) is doing. Some memes show more than one action. Considering that all of these memes show China as the antagonist, it is important to see in which ways the conflict is constructed:

- China is persecuting Christians;
- China has planned/created Covid-19;
- China is profiting from Covid-19;
- China controls/has bought Brazilian politicians;
- China controls/has bought Brazilian media;
- China controls Brazilian trade unions;

- China controls international organizations
- China is applying/testing its vaccine in Brazil;

**Table 3 - What is the act by China (or Xi Jinping) in the meme**

<b>China's action</b>	<b>N (out of 78)</b>
Persecuting Christians	6
Planned/created Covid-19	7
Profiting from Covid-19	8
Controlling/buying Brazilian politicians	15
Buying Brazilian media	4
Controlling Brazilian trade unions	1
Controlling international organizations	2
Applying/testing its vaccine in Brazil	13

Following Cesarino's (2019) research, it was expected that many of these memes would include a binary "we" versus "them", associating political opponents to the antagonist, China, as well as ways to delegitimize opponents and press. In his extensive analysis of how Bolsonaro is portrayed in memes, Chagas (2021) also found many examples with anti-democratic elements, with negative references to the judiciary, the legislative, institutions, media, minorities, etc. As many governors, the judiciary and parts of the legislative in Brazil are pushing for restriction measures and getting vaccines from China, they are delegitimized for being associated "with the enemy". With all that in mind, the fourth category, illustrated on table 4., is about how Bolsonaro's political opponents are delegitimized in relation to China.

- Political opponents (executive/legislative/judiciary) are shown as children / dogs / puppets;
- Political opponents are on Xi-Jinping's lap / arms, or at his service;
- Political opponents are profiting from Covid (signs: \$ or 100-yuan bills);
- Political opponents are helping China through the Covid-19 vaccine;

- Political opponents are in a submissive position to receive a vaccine application or examination by Xi Jinping;
- Political opponents are associated with repulse-inducing signs (rat, poison, biohazard, blood)

**Table 4. How Bolsonaro’s political opponents are associated with China**

Representation of political opponents	N (out of 78)
As children / dogs / puppet	5
In Xi-Jinping’s lap / arms, or at his service	10
Profiting from Covid	4
Helping China through Covid-19 vaccine	10
In a submissive position to receive a vaccine shot / examination by Xi Jinping	2
Associated with repulse-inducing signs (rats, poison, biohazard, blood)	4

Finally, based on the three strategic narratives about China found on Analysis A, I narrowed the scope down to the ones that express partially or entirely at least one of the following narratives. Since

1. “China is achieving hegemony through a health crisis (Covid-19)”;
2. “China is achieving hegemony through its economic power”
3. “China is achieving hegemony through its technology (5G network)”

**Table 5 - Bolsonaroist strategic narratives about China**

Strategic Narrative	N (out of 78)
1. “China is achieving hegemony through its economic power”	9
1. “China is achieving hegemony through a health crisis (Covid-19)”	17
2. “China is achieving hegemony through its technology	1

(5G network)".	
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I analyse the audiences' "re-packaging" strategic narratives, hence my choice for memes as my analysis material. From the perspective of everyday knowledge, the power of visual images remains in their ability to crystallize and abstract meaning in an easily disseminated form. Visual images are also a better way to appeal to emotions and emotive processing than are rational arguments (Hakoköngäs 2020). These characteristics, in addition to the vividness of certain images (e.g., photographs), can make visual communication rhetorically more powerful than verbal or textual messages (Joffé, 2008).

Due to the limitations of this thesis, it was established that the analysis would comprise a final selection of eight internet memes (~10%). The intention was to create a selection as representative as possible, in order to see how different memes can express (a) strategic narrative(s) with the most elements as possible. The selection of the final sample was done after looking at all the 78 memes. Since nearly half (35 out of 78) of those memes were created or shared by those in the propaganda feedback loop, I split the full sample by authorship, keeping in mind that four of out of the ten selected for analysis would be from the feedback loop (politicians, media outlet, social media influencers and organized social groups), with the requirement that every category would be represented in one meme. The other four were chosen from the group of unknown authorship. Once the representation was established (two groups of four memes each), I populated each group with memes with the most elements from categories #2 (references to China), #3 (what is China/Xi Jinping action) and #4 (how Bolsonaro's political opponents are associated with China). Then, through multimodal discourse analysis, I applied the framework of strategic conspiracy narratives (Madisson & Ventsel 2020), guided by my second research question: "How are Bolsonarist strategic narratives about China expressed in internet memes?"

## 4. BOLSONARIST VIRTUAL MILITIAS FIRST ACT AGAINST CHINA

What follows is a brief description of how the Bolsonarist media ecology operates, taking the anti-China stance as an example. On 7 April, 2020, Olavo de Carvalho published on his Facebook a post<sup>23</sup> expressing his view on Brazil's relationship with China:

*“The situation is horrible and depressing, but it is not complex nor difficult to understand. It can be summarized, without exaggeration, in the following words: Brazil, as an independent nation does not exist anymore. It is a Chinese protectorate, governed by an arrogant and intolerant ambassador who has at his service the political class, the judiciary elite, the media, the education system and a good part of the business community. The military class, conscious of their total helplessness in face of the devastating power of this foreign authority, turn a blind eye and try to save face. The nominal president cannot count on any support except from the disperse, disarmed and destitute mass that elected him and barely begins to become conscious that they have no power. Brazil is defeated and will not rise up, except in the remote hypothesis that the USA breaks the backbone of China's power.”*

With this message Carvalho joined the discussion surrounding the first diplomatic crisis between Brazil in China, which was triggered by a post on Twitter by Eduardo Bolsonaro,<sup>24</sup> published on

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/olavo.decarvalho/posts/10158078477112192>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/coronavirus-bolsonaro-son-china-row>

Wednesday morning, 18 March, 2020. His message was a response to a thread posted by Rodrigo da Silva, the journalist behind *Spotniks*, an online publication with an audience of more than 7 million people per month<sup>25</sup>. The original thread reads “*The blame for the Coronavirus pandemic in the world has a name and last name. It’s the Chinese Communist Party’s. And if you still have any doubt about this matter, you need to read this thread*”. Eduardo’s response use the reference of a HBO show that had been aired a few months earlier in Brazil:

*“Whoever watched Chernobyl will understand what happened. Substitute the nuclear power plant with the coronavirus and the Soviet dictatorship with the Chinese one. Once again a dictatorship preferred to hide something serious, over exposing it resulting in weakening them, but which would have saved numerouslives. China is to blame and liberty would be the solution.”*

The Chinese response came at 22:00, from different channels—the official diplomatic ones and from Twitter by both the account of the Chinese Embassy in Brazil and from the Chinese Ambassador, Yang Wanming. Besides reprimanding Eduardo’s “blatant anti-China attitude” and warning of the “negative consequences”, messages from the Chinese Embassy account point out the connections with the Trump administration: “Your words are extremely irresponsible and sound familiar to us. They are nothing but an imitation of your dear friends [...] We advise you not to rush to become America’s spokesperson in Brazil, under the risk of stumbling badly”<sup>26</sup>. Although directed to Eduardo’s Twitter handle (@BolsonaroSP), it also mentioned the handles of Minister Araújo, the Chamber of Deputies and the speaker of the Chamber, Congressman Rodrigo Maia, who quickly apologized on behalf of the Brazilian people and of the Chamber of Deputies.

On Thursday morning, Eduardo Bolsonaro doubled down and called the Bolsonarist “virtual militia” (the term is commonly used in Brazilian press) to promote attacks on China

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<sup>25</sup>

<http://www.leya.com.br/autor/rodrigo-da-silva/#:~:text=Rodrigo%20da%20Silva%20%C3%A9%20jornalista,pe%C3%A7as%20por%20m%C3%AAs%3A%20o%20Spotniks.>

<sup>26</sup>

<https://www.dm.jor.br/coronavirus/2020/03/embaixada-da-china-reage-a-comentario-de-eduardo-bolsonaro-contraiu-virus-mental/>

through the hashtag #ChineseVirus (#*VirusChinês* in Portuguese). The coordinated attack came from the main Bolsonarist and Olavist spreaders<sup>27</sup>:

*“An ambassador from a GENOCIDAL regime wants to violate the Brazilian Constitution to stop a member of parliament from SAYING that the #ChineseVirus is a chinese virus. Oh, FFS”* (Allan dos Santos)

*“The #ChineseVirus was a watershed in one aspect: it divided those who have moral and humanitarian values from those who only care about amoral value\$. One can’t even begin to describe the amount of Chinese dictatorship apologists coming out of the sewage”* (Rodrigo Constantino)

*“A country that until yesterday had a state policy to kill baby girls only because they were women... Who are they to say anything? NOBODY. Shut up, China. #ChineseVirus”* (Bernardo Küster)

*“China operates to implode democratic regimes #ChineseVirus”* (Leandro Ruschel)

Four hours before the Chinese response, the Directory of Analysis of Public Policies by the Getulio Vargas Foundation started mapping the interactions surrounding the debate, which generated 1,7 million tweets during the 42 hours analysed period<sup>28</sup>. As shown in the map of interactions (image 1), Bolsonaro’s “virtual militia” attempted to promote attacks on China. The nodal points in the blue section (Bolsonarist) show a massive and organized action by Bolsonarist influencers, all of them Olavists. The nodal points in pic show a fragmented group, without a strong discursive unity, but with a critical stance of Eduardo Bolsonaro, using satirical posts and memes to approach the topic in a negative way towards the Congressman.

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<sup>27</sup>

<https://revistaforum.com.br/noticias/eduardo-bolsonaro-aciona-milicia-virtual-para-levantar-hashtag-virus-chines-e-aprofunda-crise-com-a-china/>

<sup>28</sup>

<https://observademocraciadigital.org/posts/base-pro-bolsonaro-se-mobiliza-em-defesa-do-filho-do-presidente-em-tensao-diplomatica-com-a-china-no-twitter/>

## Mapa de interações do debate sobre Eduardo Bolsonaro e China no Twitter

Período de análise: 18h de 18 de março às 12h de 20 de março

### Verde — 33% das interações

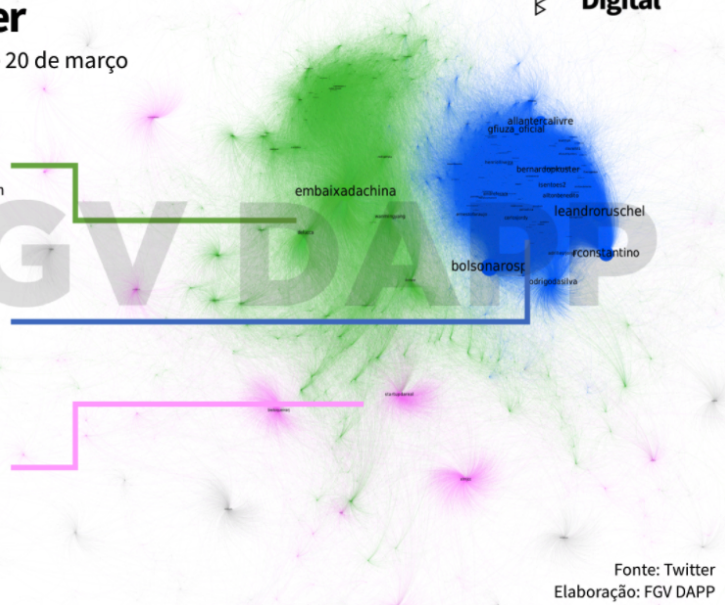
Base de discussão articulada a partir das mensagens dos perfis do embaixador chinês Yang Wanming e da Embaixada da China no Brasil, também integrando perfis de outros atores políticos que se manifestaram em repúdio aos comentários de Eduardo Bolsonaro, como Rodrigo Maia. Reúne também, de forma minoritária, perfis da esquerda partidária.

### Azul — 36% das interações

Base de defesa a Eduardo Bolsonaro, com forte discurso anticomunista, críticas ao posicionamento de autoridades que publicaram apoio aos chineses e maciça e organizada atuação de muitos influenciadores regulares dos grupos pró-Bolsonaro no Twitter.

### Rosa — 12%

Grupo fragmentado, sem forte unicidade discursiva ou a partir de determinados perfis influentes, mas com posicionamento crítico a Eduardo Bolsonaro e o uso de memes e postagens satíricas para abordar o assunto de forma negativa em relação ao parlamentar.



**DAPPREPORT**

Fonte: Twitter  
Elaboração: FGV DAPP

(Image 1 - Map of Interactions surrounding the debate between Eduardo Bolsonaro and China on Twitter.

Source: DGV DAPP)

On March 20, two banners were placed outside the Chinese embassy in Brasília, insulting both Chinese president Xi Jinping and Chinese ambassador to Brazil (image 2):



(Image 2 - banners placed outside the Chinese embassy on 20/03/20)

As the example illustrates, the Bolsonaroist online communication and mobilization is extremely effective, and for over a year now have been employed against China. The following chapters

look into the narratives that make the audiences act and behave against what they consider as the threatening “other”.

## **5. BOLSONARIST STRATEGIC NARRATIVES ABOUT CHINA**

In this chapter I briefly go over the strategic narrative framework (Miskimmon et al. 2013) in order to analyse (Olavist-)Bolsonarist strategic narratives about China, from publications and statements by the three most influential policy makers in Brazilian foreign policy during Minister Araújo's mandate, which coincide with the first half of Jair Bolsonaro's presidency.

From the material collected for this first level of analysis, the Olavist-Bolsonarist strategic narratives about China are predominantly of the international system narrative, describing the world, the main actors and where Brazil is situated, as well as the identity one, describing the Asian nation in antithetical terms. Considering that these narratives are extracted from statements by policy makers, the communication process here represents the formation. I will focus on the five components and how they interact, resulting in three intertwined strategic narratives.

### **5.1 The code-text of the “red menace” behind Bolsonarist strategic narratives about China**

As mentioned before, the ideological pulse of Bolsonarism comes from the teachings and writings by Olavo de Carvalho, who has been influential in military circles since at least 1995 (Messenberg 2017) and is credited to be the “[...] ideological thinker of the Brazilian Far-Right”

(Rocha 2021). His teachings are based on the premise that the communists are well articulated, in control of international organizations and most institutions in Brazil, particularly surrounding education, culture—to indoctrinate Brazilians in favor of communism—and foreign policy, to connect Brazil to the international communist network. His reading of Gramsci is that Cultural Marxism was successful in penetrating all spheres of Brazilian society.

However, the narrative of the Communist threat has been in the background of Brazilian politics throughout the 20th century, de Carvalho was just good at dressing it in “Cultural Marxism” clothes. It is no surprise that he found an audience among the retired generals and commanders, he was even awarded with the Pacifier medal, the highest award from the Brazilian Army. The Communists were the enemy during the military regime, particularly the domestic ones, who are expressed in the figure of the internal enemy, who appear in moments of crisis in Brazilian politics, like during the “New State”<sup>29</sup> regime (1930-1945), headed by Getúlio Vargas, and the military junta (1964-1985).

## 5.2 Strategic (Conspiracy?) Narratives by Ernesto Araújo

This subchapter is divided into three subchapters: 4.2.1 shows narratives by Araújo before he was appointed Minister of Foreign Relations, which can be considered an international systems narrative, which he constantly refers to as “globalism”. Subchapter 4.2.2 expands on his narratives about China. Finally, subchapter 4.2.3 Concludes with the three strategic narratives about China extracted from Araújo’s discourse.

### 5.2.1 Ernesto Araújo’s international systems narrative of Globalism

Araújo was the director of the Department of United States, Canada and Inter-American Affairs when he published, in December 2017, the article *Trump and the West*. In it he analyzes two

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<sup>29</sup> Estado Novo - the regime of exception that went from 1930 to 1945, led by president Getúlio Vargas.

speeches by former U.S. president Donald Trump, one given in Warsaw (06/07/2017) and the other at the UN General Assembly (19/09/2017). At the center of his article/analysis, is the theory of the clash of civilizations (Huntington 1993, 1997). According to Samuel Huntington, conflicts in the future will be connected to culture or, more specifically, to religion. The fact that Araújo was served in Washington D.C. between 2010 and 2015 could explain from where he got the terms “Cultural Marxism” and “Globalism”, both borrowed from the American alt-right (Cesarino 2019a: 540). Here already we can notice the *basic dictionary* that connects Araújo to the followers and students of Olavo de Carvalho, who were back then already Bolsonaro’s supporters and until this day make up the core of Bolsonarism.<sup>30</sup> This basic dictionary is central to the meaning-making strategies behind the Model Reader in Araújo’s writings.

In the “about me” section of his blog (*Metapolitics - Against Globalism*), he defines globalism as “[...] the economic globalization that became steered by Cultural Marxism. Essentially it is a anti-human and anti-Christian system. The faith in Christ means, today, fighting against globalism, whose ultimate goal is to break the connection between God and man, turning man into slave and God irrelevant. I want to help Brazil and the world to free themselves from the globalist ideology.”<sup>31</sup> Araújo’s self-description illustrates the Bolsonarist concentric culture, which likely contributed to positioning him for the job as Bolsonaro’s minister. Araújo’s article was published a year before he would be recommended by Olavo de Carvalho and introduced to president Bolsonaro by his sons Eduardo and Filipe Martins<sup>32</sup>.

The focus of *Trump and the West*, for this thesis, is towards the end, where Araújo asks the question: “What about Brazil? Is it a part of the West?” (Araújo 2017: 354). He dedicates one page to the answer, which should illustrate some of his moves once he was in charge of Brazil’s foreign policy. Araújo describes Brazilians as “[...] genuinely and deeply nationalistic people [...]” and reminds the reader that Brazil is now seeking OECD membership. And then concludes: “[...] in that vein, Brazil is part of the West - whether or not it wants to be - and whether or not it feels so, this West is engaged in a colossal battle for its own survival”. Araújo then lays out that Brazil needs “[...] to position itself on that stage, it cannot afford to see reality through the lens of politics alone” (ibid). Here again it is possible to recognize, as part of a strategic narrative of identity, both the *rhetorical and stylistic hyper-encoding* and the *ideological hypercoding*. If a

<sup>30</sup> <https://valor.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/11/17/olavistas-querem-partido-para-bolsonaro.ghtml>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.metapoliticabrasil.com/about>

<sup>32</sup> <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/materia/o-chanceler-do-regresso/>

Brazilian refers to him/herself as “deeply nationalist”, chances are he/she is a Bolsonaroist. “Nationalist” and “Patriot” are common self-descriptions among Bolsonaroists. As for the rest of Brazilians, most of them only wave the national flag every four years, during the FIFA World Cup.

In another post (Araújo 2018), published during the presidential elections, Araújo presented a chain that started with Bolsonaro’s opponent and ended with China as the last stop before hell. Interestingly, the chain of equivalences of the enemy, typical of populisms, was described by another Ernesto (Laclau 2005), who was also included in Araújo’s chain: “Haddad is Lula’s puppet. Lula is the puppet of Maduro, the current manager of the Bolivarian project. Maduro is Chávez’s puppet. Chávez was the puppet of Laclau’s 21st century Socialism. Laclau and every Marxism disguised as post-Marxism is the puppet of Maoism. Maoism is the puppet of hell.”<sup>33</sup> Here it is possible to recognize the *rhetorical and stylistic hyper-encoding*: the word in Portuguese for puppet (*títere*) is not the word used by Araújo. Instead, his chain repeats the word “*poste*” in every line. “*Poste*” literally means “light post”, a slang in Brazilian Portuguese for someone who is placed as a façade for someone else who is actually doing the work from behind. Bolsonaro and Bolsonaroists Araújo the target group in mind Araújo referred to Fernando Haddad in this way, who replaced Lula as the candidate for the Workers Party less than a month before the elections.

### 5.2.2 Araújo’s strategic narratives about China

REGarding two texts from before he was, at least technically, the person in charge of Brazil’s foreign policy, it is already possible to understand Araújo’s modelling through the framework presented by Madisson and Ventsel (2020). With the conflict against globalism as the topic, based on a binary modelling of the world, and the Model Reader constructed, through the ideological hypercoding anchored in nationalism and the rhetorical stylistic hyper-encoding mirrored in Bolsonaro’s own rhetoric of hate of the other; perceived as an enemy that needs to be eliminated (Rocha 2021).

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.metapoliticabrasil.com/post/linha-de-transmiss%C3%A3o>

In Araújo's inauguration as minister of foreign affairs, the model reader is Bolsonaro's electorate, and/or those following the teachings of "Professor Olavo de Carvalho, a man who, after president Jair Bolsonaro, may be the greatest responsible for the immense transformation that Brazil is living" (Araújo 2019). Araújo opens his speech with the versicle John 8:32, in Greek, stating that it is "[...] a sentence that is absolutely fundamental to understand what is happening in Brazil". With this inference he determined the framework of action for the participants in the narrative, brought up an intertextual scenario of not only religion but, again, tapped into Bolsonaro's rhetorical and stylistic hyper-encoding. Bolsonaro would cite John 8:32 at every opportunity during the campaign to mobilize the Evangelicals (another big segment of his electoral base), in his inaugurations, and during several of his speeches, including the one at the United Nations General Assembly, in 2019. Once this framing is established, he again brings up the topic of conflict, stating that "*And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*" (John 8:32) is "[...] that intimate and profound conviction that animated president Jair Bolsonaro in the extraordinary battle that he fought and is fighting to reconquer Brazil and return Brazil to Brazilians".

He then lays out what Brazil's foreign policy will be: "[...] we will fight to revert globalism and push it back to its point of departure" (Araújo 2019). Considering that in Araújo's chain of equivalences of the enemy, globalism equals cultural marxism which equals Maoism. Considering that Maoism is a Chinese version of communism, where else could Araújo push globalism back to its point of departure? In Brazil, the main argument for having good relations with China, at least throughout the last decade, was that China is Brazil's top trade partner, buying one third of Brazil exports. For Araújo, trade should not stop Brazil from defending its values: "[...] one of globalism's instruments, in order to muffle those that insurrect against it, is to spread the notion that, in order to make trade and business, one cannot have ideas or defend values. We will prove that that is completely false." (ibid). In the Bolsonarist basic dictionary, "values" is a rhetorical hyper-encoding that includes "[...] the family, the traditions, the love for the country, love for God" (ibid).

And finally, speaking of Brazil's action at the UN, Araújo advances that "[...] we will defend freedom - freedom of expression, freedom of belief, freedom on the internet, political freedom". By laying out this framing, Araújo makes inferences of intertextual scenarios that tap

into the previous reading experience by an important segment of Bolsonaro's electorate: the Evangelicals, for whom China persecutes Christians.

It is understandable that Araújo would not name China explicitly. China is the destiny of 40% of the exports in Brazil's agribusiness (7 times more than the US)<sup>34</sup>, and the Parliamentary Front of Farming and Livestock (FPA in Portuguese) has 257 members of Congress: 225 deputies (out of 513), representing 44% of the vote; in the senate, they hold 32 out of 81 seats.<sup>35</sup> And they are the ones putting pressure from within the government on to the President to not antagonize China.

When the dust from Eduardo Bolsonaro's "Covid19 equals Chernobyl" tweet had settled, Araújo published on his blog a review of "*Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*", Slavoj Žižek's book (Žižek 2020)<sup>36</sup>. The title of his post is *The Communavirus has arrived - Coronavirus awakens us again to the communist nightmare* (Araujo 2021). The article sketches the discrete meaning of the pandemic within the non-discrete logic of the communist conspiracy. For Araújo, Žižek "[...] reveals what Marxists have hid for 30 years: globalism substituted socialism as the preparatory stage towards communism". He cites and comments excerpts from the book, and the lines between what Žižek wrote and what Araújo read become blurred. All in all, the ideological hypercoding is shown throughout the article, like when Araújo claims that Žižek's book "[...] delivers without disguise the communist-globalist game of hijacking the pandemic in order to subvert completely liberal democracy and market economy, enslave men and transform them into automata deprived of spiritual dimension, easily controllable".

Responding to Žižek's claim that China's systems of digital social control was better equipped to face the pandemic, Araújo states: "With the pretext of the pandemic, the new communism tries to build a world without nations, without liberty, without spirit, driven by a central agency of 'solidarity', in charge of discipline and punishment. A state of permanent global exception, transforming the world into a huge concentration camp".

If that is the goal, the WHO is the tool: "[...] the value that WHO has at this moment to the cause of denationalization, one of the prerequisites of communism [...]". Moreover, the virus

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<https://revistagloborural.globo.com/Noticias/Economia/noticia/2020/07/china-respondeu-por-40-das-expor-tacoes-do-agro-brasileiro-no-1-semester.html>

<sup>35</sup>

<https://deolhonosruralistas.com.br/2019/03/22/nova-frente-parlamentar-da-agropecuaria-reune-257-deputados-e-senadores-com-25-psl-de-bolsonaro-so-fica-atras-de-pp-e-psd/>

<sup>36</sup> Araújo read the Italian edition, titled "*Virus: Catastrofe e solidarietà*", released on 13/03/2020.

itself is the tool: “[...]the virus appears, in fact, as a huge opportunity to accelerate the globalist project”. The inferences of the ordinary scenario of the globalist conspiracy narrative draws on the “Red Menace” code text of a communist over spectrum dominance.

In accordance with Bolsonaro’s repeated criticism of restrictive measures against the pandemic, promoted by the WHO, Araújo draws on inferences of intertextual scenarios that mix Wuhan in quarantine, WHO guidelines, and the future global communist world unleashed by the coronavirus: “[...] Then, in a deserted city, without job, without life, where each person is a prisoner in his/her cubicle, under the supervision of a supreme authority that is not even the government of his/her own country (which, no matter how dictatorial it is, at least it has a face and a flag), but an anonymous and unreachable global agency, there is the perfect configuration of communist peace and emancipation”.

Finally, in his post *An Itamaraty for Brazil’s freedom and greatness: management report* (Araújo, 2021), Araújo looks back at his work as minister: “I established the following principle: if Brazil wants to be free and democratic, with an advanced capitalist economy founded in free enterprise and private investment, and not in social control, not in a totalitarian organization, not in statism, we need to place our relationship axis in the partnership with free and democratic great nations”. Here he points out a binary modelling of the world, with inferences of two ordinary scenarios (American system and Chinese system), with a framework of action: Brazil has to choose between the two.

About the relationship with China, he adds: “I was guided by the following principle: the fact of having a certain country as Brazil’s main trade partner, be it China or any other, does not require, in any way, nor it justifies, that we offer this country the right to intervene in our institutions, limit our freedom of expression in Brazil and other fundamental freedoms, or determine our strategic decisions”. The inference scenario here is intertextual, by China’s “[...] right to limit our freedom of expression[...] ”, he is pointing back to the first diplomatic crisis caused by the “Chernobyl” tweet, when the Chinese ambassador demanded that Eduardo Bolsonaro apologize to the Chinese people.

Araújo continues: “I was also guided by the observation, absolutely realistic, that China today has ambitions of global expansion of its political and ideological influence through the projection of its economic and technological power, realities which need to be taken into account by a country like Brazil, whose political system differs entirely from the Chinese system. The

important inference of scenario here is to the 5G technology (expressed in “technological power”), a contentious topic by Bolsonaro’s administration, where the pragmatists agree on letting China (mainly through Huawei company) enter the market, whereas the more ideological wing of the government tries to find a loophole in the legislation Araújo and even considers a presidential decree Araújo to ban Huawei from the 5G network (the company is already present in almost 50% of 4G network).<sup>37</sup> The idea of banning Huawei from 5G networks in Brazil was promoted by Eduardo Bolsonaro, again, on Twitter, on 23/11/2020, when he announced Bolsonaro’s government support for the *Clean Alliance Network*, for “[...] a safe 5g network, free of China’s espionage”. After strong condemnation by the Chinese embassy, for whom Eduardo’s “totally unacceptable” words “[...] hinder Brazil’s image and undermine the friendly atmosphere between the two countries”<sup>38</sup>. This was the second diplomatic crisis between Brazil and China triggered by a tweet by Eduardo Bolsonaro, who deleted the tweet after the damage was already done.

Anchoring on the non-discrete logic of code-textual meaning making, Araújo again draws on the “Red Menace”: “I abandoned the idea - naïve and malicious - that a country’s international performance and its internal socio-political structure are mutually indifferent. I refused the perception, equally inadequate, that a country’s economic projection has nothing to do with the projection of its political system”. Here the inference is once again related to the scenario of the binary modelling of the world (American system and Chinese system), claiming that by projecting its economy, China is projecting its political system.

### 5.2.3 Bolsonaroist strategic narratives about China

From the analysis of Araújo’s discourse expressed in the five analysed texts, embedded with Olavist narratives about China and the practices and discourse by the two other most

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<sup>37</sup>

<https://www.tudocelular.com/seguranca/noticias/n167304/bolsonaro-ala-ideologica-banimento-huawei.htm>

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<sup>38</sup>

<https://observador.pt/2020/11/25/china-responde-a-polemica-de-eduardo-bolsonaro-sobre-5g-relacao-com-o-brasil-pode-sair-minada/>

important policy makers: Eduardo Bolsonaro and Filipe Martins, both traditionalists. Araújo is a traditionalist, praising Guénon and Évola in his *Trump and the West* article. In his book *War for Eternity: Inside Bannon's Far-Right Circle of Global Power Brokers*, Teitelbaum (2020) says that Araújo is more of a traditionalist than Olavo de Carvalho, and that “China represents everything that the traditionalists reject - in their view, it is a massified, materialist and scientific society, that dehumanizes people and is focused on economic aspects”. According to Teitelbaum, traditionalism is at the base of the demonization of China and rapprochement with the United States carried out by Brazil’s foreign policy. For his book, he interviewed Steve Bannon and Olavo de Carvalho, who both praise Bolsonaro’s ideological wing (known as “Olavist” in Brazil) for “[...] fighting to free Brazil from its mercantilist geopolitics, which ties the country to China instead of prioritizing the spiritual roots that make Brazil part of the Judeo-Christian West”<sup>39</sup>. During his mandate, Araújo was diplomatic in the sense of not overtly antagonizing China. But his strategic narratives can be extracted from a reading of his discourse, particularly through an analysis using the framework of strategic conspiracy narratives created by Madisson & Ventsel (2020). The result of the analysis shows three Bolsonaroist strategic narratives about China:

1. “China is achieving hegemony through its economic power”
2. “China is achieving hegemony through a health crisis (Covid-19)”;
3. “China is achieving hegemony through its technology (5G network)”

China plays a role in shaping both domestic and foreign policy. Araújo antagonizing it serves the purpose of mobilizing Bolsonaro’s base and, at the same time, serves as a token of rapprochement with the United States, which since the Obama administration’s “Pivot to Asia” strategy (2015) has been trying to rebalance China’s rise<sup>40</sup>. Bolsonaro benefitted from Trump’s support, suffering a lot less international pressure as he does now that his ally is gone. Antagonizing China to please the United States can be a dangerous game, but Bolsonaro

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<sup>39</sup> From an interview with Teitelbaum, available at <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2020-12-12/benjamin-teitelbaum-destruicao-e-a-agenda-do-tradicionalismo-a-ideologia-por-tras-de-bolsonaro-e-trump.html>

<sup>40</sup>

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific>

departures from the premise that “[...] we need China and China needs us a lot more”<sup>41</sup>, and that “China needs Brazil in order to eat”<sup>42</sup>. Still as a deputy of Brazil’s lower chamber, but already as a pre-candidate for elections, Bolsonaro visited Taiwan, in March 2018. China protested stating that Congressman Bolsonaro’s visit was a violation of “[...] the principle of One China and that not only confronts China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, but also causes potential turbulences in the Global Strategic Partnership China-Brasil”<sup>43</sup>. These moves have not been unnoticed by Americans, as former U.S. secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, a day before leaving office, congratulated Bolsonaro for moving Brazil away from the BRICS<sup>44</sup>.

The next step is to see how these strategic narratives are expressed in anti-China memes.

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<https://www.correiobraziliense.com.br/politica/2020/11/4892064-bolsonaro-precisamos-da-china-e-a-china-precisa-muito-mais-de-nos.html>

42

<https://valor.globo.com/brasil/noticia/2021/01/21/bolsonaro-elogia-araujo-e-diz-que-a-china-precisa-do-brasil-para-comer.ghtml>

43

<https://www.gazetadopovo.com.br/politica/republica/eleicoes-2018/viagem-de-bolsonaro-a-taiwan-teria-irritado-regime-comunista-chines-b2iw9l35kd3ee8xg435xu2sup/>

<sup>44</sup>On 19/01/2021, Mike Pompeo tweeted: “Remember BRICS? Well, thanks to @jairbolsonaro and @narendramodi the B and the I both get that the C and the R are threats to their people.”  
<https://twitter.com/secpompeo/status/1351590924283998208>

## 6. Anti-China internet memes and how they project strategic (conspiracy) narratives

This chapter shows the visual analysis of internet memes, using multimodal discourse analysis. The next two subchapters will present four memes whose authorship is those in the feedback loop, and four of unknown authorship. They will all be analysed using the framework of strategic conspiracy narratives (Madisson & Ventsel 2020)

### 6.1. Memes with authorship by those in the feedback loop

The first set of memes show memes created and/or shared by those in the feedback loop: politician (meme 1, image 3); organized social movement (meme 2, image 4); media outlet (meme 3, image 5); digital influencer (meme 4, image 6).

#### 6.1.1. Internet meme by a politician (Gil Diniz, state deputy in the São Paulo state legislature)

The first meme example (image 6) was published by state deputy Gil Diniz, popularly known as “reactionary mailman” (*carteiro reaçã*). Like many other politicians in Brazil nowadays, they publish professionally crafted memes that reproduce the news from media outlets in the

propaganda feedback loop. Because they are “visually pleasant” and nicely put together (the image, the story, the source), they receive a good amount of engagement: likes and shares. When they are shared, the politician (and the media outlet, to a lesser extent) reach more people (more potential audience for the media outlet, more potential votes for the politician).

CONTEXT: Gil Diniz was a mailman and was known by his colleagues as “the reactionary mailman”, for being critical of the post’s trade union and of the Workers Party. During the 2014 elections, he met Eduardo Bolsonaro, became friends, and helped him with pamphlet distribution<sup>45</sup>. After Eduardo’s election, Diniz was hired as an aide in his cabinet, and worked there until he was elected, in 2018, as deputy for the state of São Paulo, with 214.037 votes. He ran through the same party as Bolsonaro and Eduardo, the Social-Liberal Party, from which he was expelled, in 2020, after being investigated for publishing desinformation and attacks on the Supreme Court<sup>46</sup>. In fact, that investigation showed that all eight federal and state deputies<sup>47</sup> investigated published an average of two posts daily with attacks on the Supreme Court, mostly based on false information. All of these 8 deputies make and publish professionally crafted memes just like the one we see below. Diniz’s background represents well the role of internet memes in Brazilian politics currently, especially among ]Bolsonaro’s former party.

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<sup>45</sup> [https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gil\\_Diniz](https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gil_Diniz)

<sup>46</sup>

<https://www.metropoles.com/brasil/politica-brasil/carteiro-reaca-e-douglas-garcia-psl-expulsa-deputados-investigados-no-stf>

<sup>47</sup> Federal deputies: (Party - State): Bia Kicis (PSL-DF), Carla Zambelli (PSL-SP), Daniel Silveira (PSL-RJ), Filipe Barros (PSL-PR), Junio Amaral (PSL-MG) e Luiz Phillipe de Orleans e Bragança (PSL-SP); and the state deputies Douglas Garcia (PSL-SP) e Gil Diniz (PSL-SP).



(Image 3. Meme 1, by state deputy Gil Diniz)

ANALYSIS: Proceeding with the visual analysis, the positioning of the signs follow the order in which the text (meme) should be read. The very first sign is the logo of the news source— Pleno News, “a news site with conservative view”—communicating to the reader that the news presented is sourced. Right at the top, centrally positioned, is the hammer and the sickle, surrounded by big red flags, tapping into the basic diction and already presenting the ideological hypercoding (communist) to the model reader. Following the reading top down, we see Xi Jinping centrally positioned around the “communist” signs and in the middle of other Chinese officials, functioning as inferences of an ordinary scenario that determine the framework that the Chinese president is deliberating and making a decision, which is unanimously followed by those around him - —and under him, as Xi Jinping is placed higher than the other officials. The text reads “END OF THE THEORY. IN A SPEECH, CHINESE DICTATOR DEFENDS ‘NEW WORLD ORDER’”. During the Boao Forum for Asia, Xi Jinping defended that “[...]international matters must be treated by all through consultations”. Here we see the meaning-making model based on the code text of the New World Order conspiracy theory,

weaving a discrete unit (a speech stating what basically any leader would say in an international forum) into the non-discrete logic of signification of the New World Order conspiracy theory. Following the reading order, the reader finds a picture of Diniz, behind a microphone (he is the one bringing the information to the reader) on the bottom left corner, the logos of the five different channels where viewers can find him, on the bottom center, and, finally, the flag of the state of São Paulo and his name.

### 6.1.2. Internet meme by an organized social movement (MOVE FORWARD BRAZIL - *AVANÇA BRASIL*)

CONTEXT: The second example (image 7) is a meme created and shared by a social movement. Self-described as “Brazil’s biggest conservative movement, Move Forward Brazil was founded on 15/02/2015 by ‘a group of free and conservative citizens of good morals, working towards Brazil’s TRANSFORMATION into a LIBERAL STATE, with a prosperous, free and open society, permeated by the TRANSPARENCY and EFFICIENCY of everything that is public, with clear LIMITATION and SEPARATION of powers”<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> <https://www.avancabrasil.org/>



(Image 4. Meme 2, by organized social movement *Move Forward Brazil*)

ANALYSIS: The meme shows a picture of Xi Jinping and Bolsonaro. Considering the flags in the background, it is very likely that this picture was taken at a bilateral meeting between Brazil and China. Given its centrality in the picture, the first noticeable sign is the Brazilian flag, already triggering the ideologic nationalistic hypercoding. Considering the Western order of reading a text, the next sign is Xi Jinping, who is smiling, and then Bolsonaro, who is also smiling and giving the thumbs up while holding hands with the Chinese president, as if they just made an agreement and both are happy about it—Bolsonaro’s gesture shows that he is happier. With the inferences of an ordinary scenario of “politicians controlled by China”, which supports, intertextually, the main narrative of Chinese global control, the framing organizes the reader for the text: “URGENT: MINISTER OF FOREIGN RELATIONS HAS DECIDED TO QUIT. IN THE PICTURE WE SEE THE PRESIDENT OF BRAZIL NEXT TO HIM, JAIR BOLSONARO”. Considering that Ernesto Araújo was one of the most ideological members of Bolsonaro’s cabinet, expressing positions (and projecting them internationally) that are at the core of Bolsonarism, it is understandable that he would be very popular among the propaganda feedback loop. Another instance of inference of intertextual scenarios: throughout the Bolsonarist semiosphere at that time, news of China asking for Araújo’s head had been circulating for weeks. Rodrigo Constantino, one of the main pundits of Bolsonarism in mainstream media, published, two months before Araújo

stepped down: “If Ernesto Araújo is fired, Brazil ‘will soon become a Chinese province’”<sup>49</sup>. Finally, at the bottom of the meme, to the left, the organized social movement’s social media handle and URL; and the bank account link for PIX (a Brazilian form of wire transfer), with its QR code, showing how memes in Brazil are even used for fundraising.

### 6.1.3. Internet meme by a media outlet (Bernardo Küster, director of Brazil Without Fear / The Media Without Mask *Brasil Sem Medo / Mídia Sem Máscara*).

CONTEXT: Bernardo Küster has a YouTube channel with over 924.000 subscribers. He is the director of Brazil without Fear, “Brazil’s biggest conservative newspaper” and the director of Olavo de Carvalho’s website. On 27/05/2020 he was a target of search and seizure by the Federal Police under the investigation related to fake news, attacks and threats against =Supreme Court judges. Needless to say, Bernardo Kúster is a hardcore Olavist and Bolsonaroist.

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<https://jovempan.com.br/programas/3-em-1/constantino-se-demitir-ernesto-araujo-brasil-estara-proximo-de-virar-provincia-chinesa.html>



(Image 5. Meme 3 - Bernardo Küster)

ANALYSIS: This meme (image 08) is in the top five among the entire corpus (78 total) with the most signs. The reader's attention goes right at Xi Jinping's head, which is proportionally bigger than João Dória's (governor of the State of São Paulo and, for the first half of Bolsonaro's mandate, his biggest political opponent). The Chinese flag in the background shows yellow viruses instead of yellow stars. The inferences of intertextual scenario refers to the agreement between Butantan (São Paulo state's public research institute) and CoronaVac to produce, in Brazil, the Chinese vaccine for Covid-19. Doria, depicted as a jolly kid and holding a syringe with a green liquid (biohazard) with viruses, while Xi Jinping is expressing a smirk and holding a bag of money, determine the framework that the São Paulo governor was made a fool by China and will contaminate the citizens with the Chinese vaccine, which is packed with viruses, making inference of another intertextual scenario: China created the virus in a lab. There are two more rhetorical hyper-encodings: first, Xi Jinping is saying "MANDATOLY, RIGHT", but with the "R" in "*Obrigatória*" being replaced by an "L", a racist way of referring to how Chinese people speak Portuguese. Second, the rats around the politicians, the bag of money and the syringe, referring to a common expression in Portuguese of calling dirty politicians "rats". Finally, the discrete and non-discrete logic of code-textual meaning making is combined with the ideological hypercoding, through the

reference of “mandatory”, connecting the vaccination in São Paulo to the conspiracy of China’s dictatorial government system being implemented through.

#### 6.1.4. Meme by a digital influencer (Waoramos)

CONTEXT: Waoramos’ Twitter account was suspended for violating Twitter rules, but other memes were found under that nickname, all of them with right-wing themes.



(Image 6. Meme 4 - Waoramos)

ANALYSIS: Compared to the previous memes, the one by Waoramos (image 09) already shows a lot more simplicity, showing a crying “Wojak” and a dark-haired “Yes Chad”, two popular meme templates put together, which could indicate that it could have been made by a simple meme-maker app. Here the inference of intertextual scenarios is made within the meme genre, as does the basic dictionary: those familiar with the meme genre already know which attitudes to expect from the “characters”: crying Wojak infers “the loser”, whereas “Yes Chad” infers “the arrogant”, “superior”. The ideological hypercoding strategy is actualized through the red color of Wojak’s t-shirt with the hammer and the sickle in the middle, representing the Brazilian leftist, whereas Chad is wearing a particular version of a “Lacoste” polo t-shirt, an expensive piece of clothing in Brazil, hence representing Bolsonaro voter (the rich in Brazil’s biggest cities, are where Bolsonaro won the majority of his votes). Another inference of two intertextual scenarios

come from each characters' speech: Wojak says "You can't blame China like that, you are being xenophobic, your heart is pure hatred, you are a racist. It is our biggest trade partner, c'mon, apologize now!". To which Chad responds "THEY ATE BATS, SONS OF A BITCH." Wojak's argument (expressed in lower case, inferring inferiority) taps into the common argument that Bolsonaro (and those in his cabinet) should not antagonize China. Chad's response uses the rhetorical and stylistic hyper-encoding of insulting, trolling, and using ad-hominem attacks which is constantly practiced and advocated by Olavo de Carvalho, another thing that he imported from the alt-right. Finally, Chad's response refers to the same urban legend Bolsonaro referred to in the beginning of this thesis.

## 6.2. Memes by unknown authorship

The next set of memes consists of memes whose authorship is unknown. They look simpler but still pack a good amount of signs and inferences, still allowing the reader to gather at least a sub narrative. Keeping in mind Cesarino's (2019a) research, it should come to no surprise that the memes created by those immersed in the Bolsosphere are heavily influenced by what Laclau (2005) referred as the axis of difference (drawing an antagonistic division between friend and enemy). This antithetic identity creation is evident throughout these memes, associating domestic opponents with a foreign enemy.

### 6.2.1. Meme 5 - "Judas Traitors"

ANALYSIS: The picture (Image 7, Meme 4) shows three governors, João Dória (São Paulo), Wilson Witzel (Rio de Janeiro) and Ronaldo Caiado (Goiás). They are smiling. Juxtaposed to their foreheads, emojis of money bags. So the first inference the reader makes is that the governors are happy because they have money. By reading the text (left-right, top-bottom), it starts with two words "Judas TRAITORS", and ends with a big amount of 100-yuan bills. If the

the model reader is an Evangelical, then the chain of inferences starts with the Christian rhetorical hypercoding and a basic Evangelical dictionary: the three governors are traitors of the worst kind, like Judas who betrayed Jesus for money, they betrayed Bolsonaro, since the President is against restrictive measures to contain Covid-19, and these three governors imposed them as infection rates skyrocketed in their states. Among the shops and activities they suspended, they closed church services. If the model reader happens to be an anticommunist Evangelical (a cross-section of two big Bolsonaro's electorates), then another layer of ideological hypercoding is added: they not only betrayed and got money for it, but were also marked by the Beast (represented as Mao, the Chinese communist who persecutes Christians), as the money bag emojis are placed right on their foreheads. If the Model Reader is an Evangelical, the process of interpretation, guided by a binary modelling of the world, operates under two types of conflict, with inferences of intertextual scenarios: Judas-Governors-China-Evil versus Jesus-Bolsonaro-God-Good.



(Image 7. Meme 5 - "Judas Traitors")

### 6.2.2. Meme 6 - “Xi is the boss”

ANALYSIS: Another meme (Image 8 - Meme 6) that, by the look of it, was easy to put together, but yet communicates an entire strategic narrative. The first noticeable sign is the Chinese flag, then Xi Jinping raising his hand, mouth open, as if he were yelling. The verbal text says something that could be closely translated as “I’m the boss of this fucking shit!!!”—with the last two words showing “L” where it should be “R”, and an “i” where it should be “lh” (“*porra*”, “*caralho*”). Only after reading the flag, Xi Jinping’s “yelling” and his words, can the reader pay attention to the detail of the background: it’s the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies. The rhetorical and stylistic hyper-encoding taps on the way to interpret Xi’s aggressive behaviour, but at the same time mocks him because of the “L” instead of the “R”. The positioning of the Chinese flag behind the tribune, and Xi’s posture as if he were in the Chamber of Deputies, infer to the framework of action that he is indeed the boss, which, as many other memes show, a fourth strategic narrative about China could be drawn: “China is in control of Brazilian politicians/politics”



(Image 8. Meme 6 - “Xi is the Boss”)

### 6.2.3. Meme 7 - “Xi’s shot”

ANALYSIS: This meme (Image 9 - Meme 7) has a good balance of visual signs and verbal text. On top it reads “IF THE POLITICIANS DIE, BRAZIL WILL BE SAFE!”. The populist ideological hypercoding is set, with the rhetorical hyper-encoding that is common to many Bolsonarists, who are anti-politics. Next, from top down, six heads of men representing all Bolsonaro’s main opponents, with their pants down. From left to right: William Bonner, the anchor of the most-watched news broadcast *Jornal Nacional*, aired every evening on *Globo* channel, which Bolsonaro refers to “as the enemy”<sup>50</sup>. Next is Rodrigo Maia, president of the Chamber of Deputies and also a political opponent. Then João Dória, governor of São Paulo and one of Bolsonaro’s main opponents. The next one is Lula, former president and Bolsonaro’s nemesis. Then, Gilmar Mendes, Supreme Court judge and also considered an enemy among Bolsonarists. Finally, Rodrigo Pacheco, president of the Senate. Together these men represent the media, the legislative branch, the political opponents from the Center and from the Left, and the judiciary. Here the conflict as the topic is expressed, with all Bolsonaro’s “enemies” lined up to receive a vaccine shot by “nurse” Xi Jinping, the international “enemy”, who is asking “WHO IS GOING TO BE THE FIRST?”. Finally, written on Xi’s scrubs is CORONAVAC CHING-LING, which brings up the stylistic hyper-encoding: “ching-ling” is a racist slang for cheap (almost disposable) products made-in-China. All of the “politicians” represented have called for vaccination, which in Brazil is done mainly thanks to the China - São Paulo partnership, producing in the state the Chinese vaccine with technology and components from China. Coronavac represents more than 80% of the shots given in the country. Bolsonaro has mocked the Chinese vaccine several times.<sup>51</sup>

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<https://www.metropoles.com/brasil/politica-brasil/em-audio-bolsonaro-diz-que-globo-e-inimiga-e-critica-bebbiano>

<sup>51</sup> <https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/veja-10-vezes-em-que-bolsonaro-criticou-coronavac-24843568>



(Image 9. Meme 7 - "Xi's shot")

#### 6.2.4. Meme 8 - "Chinese deal"

ANALYSIS: This meme (Image 10 - Meme 8) looks cute, but it's packed with racism, conflict, intertextual scenarios and conspiracy theory. It is titled "Chinese man humor" and requires from the reader to relate to the rhetorical and stylistic hyper-encoding, with again switching "R" for "L", as well as inferences of intertextual scenarios of sub narratives. The story told goes as follows: "I spread a virus to the whole world. I brought down the world's economy, including Trump's. I made friends in Brazil. Globo. Dória. I sold everything overpriced, ventilators, masks. Now I am also going to sell the vaccine overpriced as well. I profit and Brazilians fight with Bolsonaro. Chinese deal. Thank you Brasil!" The expression "Chinese deal" (*Negócio da China*) is an expression in Portuguese that means "a very advantageous (trade) agreement", tracing back to the time when European merchants would make fortunes selling Chinese and other Asian goods.

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(Image 10. Meme 8 - “Chinese deal”)

## 7. CONCLUSION

This thesis applied a semiotic approach to analyze Bolsonaroist strategic narratives about China and how they are reflected on internet memes. I described Bolsonaroism using concepts from the Tartu-Moscow School of semiotics of culture. First, its development is shown through the model of the semiosphere, where a key spreader, Olavo de Carvalho, who was a peripheral writer and commentator in Brazil, did boundary work and translation after gaining contact with the American alt-right. Alongside conspiracy theories and trolling, internet memes have increasingly expanded their role as a media of political communication.

Considering that Bolsonaro's foreign policy has an antagonistic stance towards China, which is reflected in the constant provocations made by the Olavist members of his cabinet, I set out to research the Bolsonaroist strategic narratives about China, guided by my first research question. My empirical material was discourses and writings by the most Olavist of all, Minister Ernesto Araújo. Since Araújo projects a self-description of someone who lives to free Brazil and the world from Globalism, I found pertinent to apply the framework of strategic conspiracy narratives for the analysis of his texts. I analyzed Araújo's discourse and extracted three strategic narratives out of it: in short "China is seeking hegemony through 1) its economic power, 2) its technology (5G) and 3) the pandemic.

Parallely, I collected anti-China memes and analysed 8 of them, guided by my second research question: how are Bolsonaroist strategic narratives about China expressed in internet memes? The findings show that strategic narratives can easily be expressed in internet memes, applying the framework conceptualized by Madisson and Ventsel. Also important was the reference of Bolsonaroism as digital populism, especially knowing what guides the creation of online content by those immersed in the Bolsonaroist semiotic space. As Cesarino described,

drawing a division friend-enemy is central in the meaning-making and production of online content, thus by analysing the memes, I found a forth strategic (conspiracy) narrative: “China is bringing Brazil under its global hegemony through the control (mainly by economic power but also through its vaccine) of domestic elements, namely politicians, the media, and organized society.

Another important finding is how central the propaganda feedback loop is in Bolsonarism. In a very short period, an entire media ecology has evolved, offering identity confirmation (sometimes over facts) to a considerable segment of the Brazilian population, who is encouraged by the populist politicians not to consume mainstream media show how “conservative” media outlets promote “conservative politicians” while both feed the audience/voter with more identity confirmation. In this culture, memes have attained a level of sophistication to the point that they are even used for fundraising.

A framework combining concepts such as propaganda feedback loop, conspiracy cascades, strategic conspiracy narratives and, Cesarino’s science of digital populism appears to offer fruitful possibilities in the study of information warfare, or, more specifically, memetic warfare.

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# RESÜMEE

## Bolsonarolik kommunikatsioon

### bolsonarolikud strateegilised narratiivid hiinavastastes meemides

Magistritöö “bolsonarolik kommunikatsioon – bolsonarolikud strateegilised narratiivid hiinavastastes meemides” tegeleb kahe uurimisküsimusega:

Mis iseloomustab Hiina kohta käivad bolsonarolikke strateegilisi narratiive?

Kuidas väljenduvad Hiina kohta käivad bolsonarolikud strateegilised narratiivid internetimeemides?

Teoreetiline raamistik ühendab endas Tartu-Moskva koolkonna kultuurisemiootika (eeskätt Lotmanilt ja Uspenskilt), strateegiliste narratiivide teooria (lähtudes semiootilisest lähenemisest, milleks on strateegiliste vandenõunarratiivide teooria) ja Brasiilia digitaalse paremäärmusliku populismi, ehk bolsonarismi, mida on käesolevalt mõistetud kui näidet kontsentrisest kultuurist.

Analüüs koosneb kahest osast: esiteks on kajastatud bolsonarolikke Hiina kohta käivaid strateegilisi narratiive, analüüsides selleks Brasiilia välisminister Ernesto Araújo’ga seotud diskursust, kasutades selleks strateegilistele vandenõunarratiividele rakendatud kultuurisemiootikat, keskendudes eelkõige mõistetele, nagu Mudellugeja, Mudelautor, konflikt teema ja koodtekst. Uurimistööst selgus, et bolsonarolikud hiinakohased strateegilised narratiivid ulatuvad tagasi „Punase hirmu“ vandenõuteooriani, mis oli Brasiilias esil terve 20. saj vältel ning leidis sealses poliitikas olulisematel võimukeskme muutumise hetkedel strateegilist kasutamist.

Hiina - ehk kommunism - on bolsonarismi vaatepunktist „võõras“ ning väljendab konflikti, mis on tõlgendatud narratiivi teemana ja mida kasutatakse riigisisese toetuspõhja loomiseks, sest bolsonaristide identiteet luuakse läbi vastanditel põhineva tähendusloome. Välispoliitika osas võimaldab hiina vaenlasena kujutamine lähendada end Ameerika Ühendriikidele, seda eriti ajal, mil ametis oli Trump. Hiinat mainitakse harva selgesõnaliselt, kuid diskursiivne strateegia on sellegipoolest Mudellugeja suhtes edukas, kasutades järeldusi, retoorilist hüperkooderimist ning ideoloogilist hüperkooderimist.

Analüüsi teine osa viidi läbi 8 Hiinavastase internetimeemiga (valitud 78 meemiga korpusest), kasutades selleks multimodaalset diskursuseanalüüsi. Seejuures rakendati algusest peale sama lähenemist ja lisaks ka propaganda tagasisideringi termineid ning “digitaalse populismi viit reeglit” (pärit Cesarinolt), mis juhivad bolsonaristide veebivõrgustikes sisuloomet. Tulemustest selgub, et Hiina kohta käivad strateegilised narratiivid leiavad meemides kajastamist viisil, millega kaasneb sõbra ja vaenlase binaarne vastandamine, vaenlasega seotud ohu õhkkonna loomine ning olulisemate siseriiklike poliitiliste vastaste Hiinaga seostamine. Meemid võivad ka kujutada vaid osakest lugeja poolt loodavast tervikust. Selle, mis pole öeldud, võib lugeja Mudellugeja diskursiivsete strateegiate kaudu “dekodeerida”. Seejuures tuli osades meemides esile ka bolsonarismiga seotud propaganda tagasisidering, kus poliitikud-meedia asjatundjad-valijad/vaatlejad omavahel vahetuvad ning neid premeerib enda identiteeti kinnitamise jagamine, mis on mõnikord ka faktidest olulisem.

Tulemused on aluseks edasisele uurimistöole, kus üks võimalik uurimissuund oleks memeetiline sõjapidamine, et näha, kuidas kuvatakse narratiiviga seotud meeme rahvusvahelisele auditooriumile. Paljud uurimistöös leitud meemidest olid seotud Covid-19 pandeemia ja Hiina vaktsiiniga, teine uurimissuund võiks keskenduda analüüsile, mis selgitaks, kuidas kasutatakse meeme vaktsiinidega seotud rahvusvahelises teabesõjas.

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