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Brazil, Amazon, World: Fake News and the Social Contract

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Fake news, disinformation, hate speech, post-truth, conspiracy theory, various forms of denialism, and the barefaced lies of politicians all come together as something like the ideational hallmark of neoliberalism. There are many lies, of many kinds, but there has to be a container where they all coexist comfortably. And this is neoliberalism's enormous lie that, if we make "the" (as if there were only one) market free, it will run everything. Law trammels the freedom of the market as does the idea of a social contract. A contract requires that the parties tell the truth, and the idea of democratic government implies that those elected by the people to represent them won't lie. But government, such as it exists, serves "the market" of rich and powerful individuals, corporations, and media outlets, white elites whose wealth supposedly demonstrates their superiority over historically marginalized groups. When people are monads whose freedom is restricted to consumption

patterns dictated by profit, public responsibility is subservient to private interest.

One form of the lie is rejection of deep inquiry into social context, which is banalized into immediate gratification and sensationalism, a barrage of soundbites lacking depth or breadth. In Edward Snowden's words, hyper-consumption of online information “comes at the cost of being *hyper-consumed*”, bled dry of data regarding our (externally imposed) “preferences” that is then used to reconstruct our “reality”. Then, “the real cost to this recursive construction of reality from the ephemera of our preferences is that it tailors a separate world for each individual”, where meaning is manufactured from mere coincidence, which is “the essence of paranoia”, a mental state that is most amendable to political manipulation. The hyper-individualist idea of freedom as “I’m alright, Jack” entails complicity with the injustices and crimes that inevitably appear when enormous inequalities are covered up by the system that causes them. The worse the injustice, the more intractable the national and international systems in which untruths thrive and morph into violent forms.

There are connections, then, between apparently isolated atrocities in Brazil, like the school massacre in the Suzano municipality of São Paolo (2019), the murder of a gay politician, sociologist, and human rights activist Marielle Franco and her driver, Anderson Pedro Gomes, in Rio de Janeiro (2018), and the Tasso da Silveira Municipal School massacre of twelve children aged from twelve to fourteen, ten of them girls in 2011, also in Rio de Janeiro. And they have elements in common with mass killings in other countries, for example, the Christchurch mosque massacre (2019), the Pittsburgh synagogue shootings (2018), and the El Paso shootings (2019). The killers are males who tend to frequent deep web forums where anonymity covers criminality. They consume conspiracy theories and fake news, detest in-depth knowledge, spread hate speech against women and historically defamed ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, fetishize firearms, and revere facistoid political leaders like Bolsonaro and Trump. Racist, white supremacist, homophobic, misogynist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, and opposed to human rights, they represent the rise of the far-right around the world, which also takes the form of a kind of resentful, violent revenge against the political and cultural achievements of LGBTQI+, Black, Indigenous, environmentalist, and feminist movements in recent years.

They've gained ground through the mass media, digital networks, and in the political arena where far-right parties and groups are advancing in the so-called strong democracies of Europe, the US, UK, Canada, and Australia. In countries like Brazil and the Philippines, they're quite openly linked with paramilitary and mafia-style organizations that control territories by means of militias and pentecostalist or evangelist churches. In Brazil, the far right has infected the whole social body mainly through lethal violence "on the edge" where it targets historically vulnerable groups. But random terror fans inwards from the periphery to become total terror because everyone knows that a military policeman can beat up two employees of a snack bar in Rio de Janeiro if the snack isn't what he orders, or a man can come close to killing a scrap metal collector in São Paolo because she refuses his advances. Violence can happen anywhere at any time when the legal system doesn't prosecute those who incite violence in Internet forums, and even backs religious and political leaders who incite hate speech. Then, the targets become marked as "other", not fit to be deemed citizens or as having rights.

The authorities aren't going to rectify the mendacious system that brought them to power. In Brazil they include judge Marília Castro Neves, judge Marcelo Bretas (defender of child labor), prosecutor Deltan Dallagnol—who colluded with judge Sergio Moro to follow a script that led to the impeachment of former president Dilma Rousseff and the imprisonment of former president Lula—and president Jair Bolsonaro. They're all instigators of violence and spreaders of fake news to "justify" it. The deeply homophobic, misogynist, and anti-intellectual Federal Police aren't going to listen to a gay journalist and a feminist academic who denounce the violence of the deep web when one of the two Suzano school killers appears with a gun and wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with Bolsonaro's portrait before opening fire on students and teachers at the school. They'd been planning the attack for a year and had asked for weapons and support on the far right imageboard Dogolachan where users discuss, praise and plan acts of violence and support neo-Nazism and pedophilia.

It's no doubt (logically) true that the police lack resources and skills to monitor the potential killers who gather in violent forums, but the main explanation for the inaction is much worse because civil, military, and federal police officers are joining militiamen in frequenting these forums and instructing killers. No action is being taken because people in high places

share the views of the forum members. Hence, when judge Marília Castro Neves was criticized for commenting in a Facebook group with other magistrates that one of the authors of this article, former member of parliament Jean Wyllys, should be killed in the interests of “prophylactic execution”, she was able to brush it off as a “joke”. But this use of “prophylactic” is no joke when placed in the context of other comments like, “Socialists are sick, they are psychopaths, they must be segregated from social life!” and her slanderous declarations just after Marielle Franco, forthright critic of police brutality and extrajudicial killings, was murdered by two former police officers. Castro held Franco responsible for her own death because she “hung out with bandits … The left are trying to add value to a corpse as common of any other”. She was unanimously absolved of calumny. Not only did her lies dilute outrage about the murders of Franco and her driver but they drew attention away from what was not done, namely making connections between the suspect killers, vigilante militia groups, federal police (which had bought the batch from which the bullets came), the Bolsonaro family, online hate forums, and fake news about Marielle Franco being propagated by legal, political, and religious authorities.

It seems incredible that people can believe Bolsonaro’s anti-vaccine braggadocio when he claimed—but, for many, *ordered*—“The Brazilian people will not be anyone’s guinea pig”. He then added some bizarre allegations, laced with his usual machismo, echoing online theories that the vaccine alters people’s DNA: “If you become an alligator, it’s your problem… if a woman grows a beard or a man starts to speak with a thin voice…” But this was only the start. The message was propagated by evangelical pastors through mobile phones and Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, which are free of charge in Brazil, while checking information can cost money. Depending on the influence of local pastors, Indigenous people often believe stories like the vaccine is the devil’s work to distance people from God. As a result, the COVID-19 mortality rate for Indigenous people is 110% higher than the national average. Indigenous journalist Anapuaka Tupinamba cites a false story about nine hundred Xingu people dying after receiving a vaccine, adding, “What we have today is a ‘fake’ Internet. When you see fake news, you can’t check it. So it feels like I’m on the internet but not really. I’m almost on the intranet of a large company.” One person who won’t be lamenting the high death rate of Indigenous people is Bolsonaro who

was quoted on 12 April 1998 by the newspaper *Correio Braziliense* as saying, “It’s a shame that the Brazilian cavalry hasn’t been as efficient as the Americans, who exterminated the Indians”.

Anapuaka Tupinamba is right about the vast intranet. Fake news and other speech that dehumanizes individuals or groups as part of a disinformation campaign for political profit couldn’t succeed without the business model, or what Shoshana Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism (“With so little left that could be commodified, the last virgin territory was private human experience”), of platforms like Google, Twitter, Instagram, Amazon, Netflix, WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, Tik Tok, etcetera, which extract data from their users to send propaganda tailored to their desires and fears. The new communications hardware is so handy that sender and receiver aren’t separated in time or cyberspace so people are subjected to an uninterrupted flow of information that increasingly manipulates their beliefs, prejudices, traumas, fears, and resentments. It’s very easy to guide people away from real causes to scapegoats chosen by those in control. And when a population isn’t well informed, owing to huge deficits in the public sector, education for example, the spread of misinformation isn’t always malicious. But it still spreads.

Brazil has a social media user base that is fertile ground for fake news. Social media usage is relatively new and over half Brazil’s voting population hasn’t finished high school and is highly susceptible to misinformation. One study comes to the staggering conclusion that, in terms of functional literacy (sufficient literacy and numeracy skills to function in the community), “90% of the population could be seen as illiterate, either because they never attended school, dropped out early or have poor cognitive skills”. This is the human infrastructure of fake news in Brazil and it’s Bolsonaro’s great good fortune. The publication *RioOnWatch* analyses four factors that led to his being elected: digital illiteracy and “fake news”, the crucial role of WhatsApp, anti-Workers’ Party sentiment (*antipetismo*), and evangelical churches. He was all but excluded from mainstream media but was still able to mount a multi-million-dollar social media campaign of spreading false allegations against his PT rival Fernando Haddad (for example, by using the “School without Homophobia” program to accuse him of providing a “gay kit” to young children). One study found that 86% of false content shared on WhatsApp benefited Bolsonaro and targeted Haddad and the PT.

At the time, Bolsonaro's son Eduardo bragged that he'd met Steve Bannon who offered assistance, namely regarding manipulation of data. This should be a warning that fake news will be an enormous problem for the 2022 elections where Bannon has already weighed in: "About 30 days before the big intermediate elections, Jair Bolsonaro will face the most dangerous leftist in the world, Lula. A criminal and communist supported by all the media here in the US, all the left-wing media. This election is the second most important in the world and the most important of all time in South America. Bolsonaro will win unless it is stolen by, guess what, the machines."

During the economic boom of Lula's mandate *antipetismo* wasn't very widespread but, now, with a burgeoning use of the digital media, it's growing by the day, resurrecting Operação Lava Jato (Operation Car Wash) as a result of which Lula was jailed, while ignoring evidence produced in 2019 that the investigating judge, Sergio Moro, Bolsonaro's Minister of Justice and Public Security (2019 – 2020), was—as the Supreme Court ruled in March 2021—partial in his decisions and passed on inside information to prosecutors. Evidence doesn't matter as Lava Jato served its purpose of preventing Lula from winning the 2018 elections. Since it worked so well in 2018, and all fake news infrastructure is still in place, *antipetismo* is sure to be a major influence in the 2022 elections. Any social advances achieved during Lula's years in office are erased. Meanwhile, critical media outlets are being defanged. In 2019, there were 208 attacks against them, almost 60% of them in speeches made by members of the government and aimed at particular journalists. In the favelas, however, some surveys suggest that neither *antipetismo* nor WhatsApp are as influential as ultra-right Christians, although of course they deploy the other two strategies. RioOnWatch describes the evangelical churches as "hotbeds of conservative political activity". Hence, in the 2018 elections, 46% of Pentecostal evangelicals were aware that their pastor was supporting a candidate and, in almost all cases, this was Bolsonaro with his loathing for LBGTQI+ rights and promises to restore "family values" ("If your son begins to act like this, sort of gay, he deserves a smack"), which then incited political enmity with fearmongering about Haddad encouraging homosexuality.

The three words Bible, Bullet, and Beef are rather more than an alliteration game. They designate a powerful lobby in Congress, fully supported by Bolsonaro as this is his power base. And they are set on clearing the Amazon

rainforest. The bible lobby, with 326 seats in the 513-seat lower house (2018), represents the growing power of evangelicals with a flock of 30% of Brazilians, as well as great wealth (especially in the case of the billionaire Edir Macedo, founder of the Universal Church), and media power, with television and radio stations which they use as well as the pulpit to instruct their congregations how to vote. The beef lobby includes ranchers (*Ruralistas*, members of which murdered environmentalist and human rights activist Chico Mendes), loggers and large landowners, who want to remove Indigenous people from their lands and reserves so they can turn the rainforest over to agribusiness. Ranchers and candidates elected with agribusiness money overlap with the bible and bullet lobbies so the three groups represent a powerful, cohesive bloc occupying well over half the seats in Congress. All three groups are well aware that poverty (affecting some 30% of the population) provides the perfect excuse for cutting down the rainforest. And defenseless humans are dragged into the process: “Environmental crime prosecutors now describe a fraud that turns poor Brazilians into foot soldiers for criminal gangs, logging companies, and industrial farming operations”. The chaotic legal system regarding land management also becomes fake news fodder to be exploited by the lobbies. Criminal gangs find the loopholes. Then, with phony paperwork in hand, they recruit desperate families and convince them the land is up for grabs. They bus them out to remote reserves, promising to pay for supplies and food. The claims are always challenged in court, but they sit in legal limbo for years. By that time, the camps have grown into villages, and it gets more politically complicated to evict hundreds of families with children. All the while, the masterminds are raiding the forest of its hardwood. When they’re done, they move on to their next target. Many of the families can’t make it on their own and end up abandoning the land they fought so hard for, or selling it cheap to big farmers amassing soybean and ranching empires.

The law, itself a lie, is lied about. Hence, Luis Antônio Nabhan Garcia, rancher and Bolsonaro’s land-policy honcho, claims, “All that land that’s been cleared in the Amazon, the law allowed it”. Any attempt, nationally or internationally, to save the rainforest is a plot, driven by envy of Brazil’s natural resources, “Behind it all—all the lies about the Amazon—is a dirty war fueled by geopolitics and hypocrisy [...]. “No other country in the world

has the potential to boost production the way Brazil does, and that scares people.”

The bullet lobby consists of serving and retired police and military officers, with nearly 40 seats in Congress. Financed by gun companies, they dominate or run militias in violence-ridden parts of cities. “Managing violence”, they collect monthly taxes from residents and business owners for their protection service. Since they and their associated militias are in cahoots with the security forces and the Bolsonaro family, they commit crimes with impunity. In some neighborhoods, they control gas distribution, public transport, and cable TV as well as constituting the “neo-Pentecostal narco-militia”. Finally, Bolsonaro has co-opted the military by offering cabinet and other government posts. Apart from nurturing a pernicious *déjà vu* of the dictatorships, his appointment, for example, of General Eduardo Pazuello as health minister from May 2020 to March 2021 only exacerbated the deliberately neglectful management of the pandemic. Pazuello has also been accused of another grave form of misinformation as he obstructed access to essential information about COVID-19 and its effects.

Steve Bannon isn’t mistaken about the importance of the 2022 elections. There’s a risk that Bolsonaro’s largely unstructured (like the mob that stormed the Capitol: “our president wants us here”) extremist supporters might swell the ranks of the bullet caucus to keep him in power if he loses. Bolsonaro himself is often described as uncharismatic, mediocre, inept, a man of no substance, and an embarrassment to some of his wealthy backers. As a populist he compensates with his cockalorum style and fanfaronade, but bluster is also a form of fake news because it’s a smokescreen distracting attention from what lurks behind: the crimes and injustice of a system built on lies, and hence breakdown of the social and civic sphere. It’s also a matter of rule of law, which is supposed to ensure that no abuse of power occurs, and to protect human rights. The 2020 Rule of Law Index of the World Justice Project shows backsliding on a global scale, for the third consecutive year. If Bolsonaro’s bibles, beef, and bullets aren’t defeated in next year’s elections, the losers will include the Amazon, rule of law, human rights, and the social contract.